

Ahead of the game

Very few psychologists or members of the popular science reading public will not have heard about mirror neurons. The neuroscientist Ramachandran made the startling comparison of their discovery as of equal importance to neuroscience, as

the structure of DNA to biology. With that sort of hype, it is not surprising that discussion of mirror neurons turns up in just about every popular science book on the brain and mind. These books now overpopulate the science section of bookstores (if you can find one still open that is), but few of these books have been written by someone who has actually conducted the research on them.

So I was delighted to discover the recent publication of *The Empathic Brain* by Christian Keysers, a leading researcher in the field. About 10 years ago Keysers undertook his postdoctoral training with Giacomo Rizzolatti and his team in Parma who discovered mirror neurons and, soon after, he had a meteoric rise to become director of the Netherlands Institute for Neuroscience in his early thirties.

If anyone can write about the brain mechanisms of empathy, Keysers is the man, as his whole research agenda has focused on this area for the last decade. Also anyone who has heard Keysers speak at conferences cannot fail to be impressed by his energy, wit and personable charm.

Keysers' book captures these qualities in spades. Written for the general public in a lively style, he immediately pulls the reader into his vision of human nature as an animal specialised for empathy. It opens with his account of almost losing emotional control at the altar during his own wedding, and then noting the same resonating emotions in his friends and family in the congregation. Keysers is not ashamed to wear his heart on his sleeve, as revealed in the many anecdotes and personal stories that punctuate the book. But these are not gratuitous. I particularly liked the one where he was momentarily confused lying in bed with his legs intertwined with his wife's and could not understand why the foot he could see at the end of the bed that usually occupies the space where his own foot should be, did not budge when he tried to move it. (Those of you familiar with the rubber hand illusion will know the answer.) At other times some of the anecdotes make for uncomfortable reading, such as the argument and eventual breakup with a former

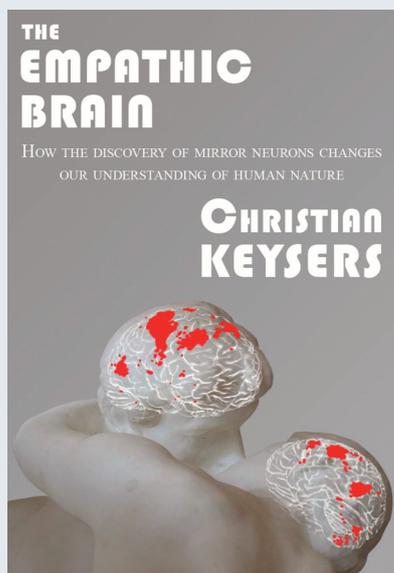
girlfriend. It is, after all, a book about the emotional relationship between humans.

The science of brain mechanisms is here of course. The book covers the candidate regions of the brain, the circuits identified and the relatively different neural activity in those who score high or low on measures of empathy, as well as the special populations, such as individuals with autism or psychopaths. Various aspects of this research field have been reported in other popular accounts of mirror neurons already. What sets *The Empathic Brain* ahead of all other books in my opinion, is that it is such a great authoritative read, providing wonderful insights into the day-to-day running of these studies. Keysers with his wife Valeria and his close associates and colleagues are the guys that did the actual studies that others report. Through Keysers' personal voice the reader learns details that are just never reported in scientific papers – details that make the studies come alive as real events rather than abstracted clinical reports. For example, in one particularly evocative passage, Keysers tells the reader the exact wording of an experimental scenario to induce feelings of disgust. I think the account is best left to the imagination, but let's just say it requires a strong stomach to read about a tramp who vomits in your face! We also learn how Keysers subjected his beloved Valeria to disgusting smells to prove that the mirroring system extended to beyond just actions. 'I almost started retching at one point,' she recounts. One cannot help but get carried away with his enthusiasm. These snippets of real conversations bring personality to the individuals, which makes for such page-turning reading.

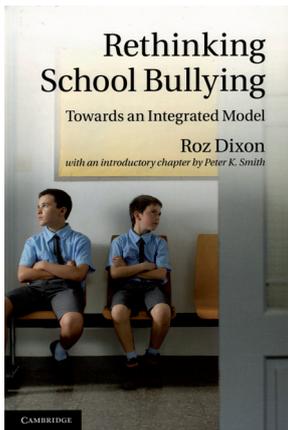
Despite the popularity of reporting mirror neuron research, there are still controversies in the field regarding whether they constitute a special class of neuron or rather a more general purpose property of about 10 per cent of neurons found in the premotor areas that simply reflect the activity of associative learning networks. Keysers does not address this, but then I am not sure that this is a controversy that the general reader would understand or, more importantly, care about. What Keysers does offer is a grand perspective on many aspects of the empathic brain that could benefit from understanding the interconnectedness of humans. In the closing chapters he explains why we should rethink morality, education and ethics in light of the way we have evolved to resonate with each other. And these are issues that we should all care about.

Finally, it is worth noting that *The Empathic Brain* is also published as a Kindle ebook at an extremely competitive price in comparison to conventional books. This is a growing trend in publishing and so it is only a matter of time before ebooks become the industry standard. So in another way *The Empathic Brain* is a book ahead of the game.

Createspace; 2011; Pb £8.25; Kindle ebook £2.14
 Reviewed by Bruce Hood, who is the Chair of Developmental Psychology at Bristol University and author of *SuperSense: From Superstition to Religion – the Brain Science of Belief* and the forthcoming *The Self Illusion*, both published in the UK by Constable & Robinson



The Empathic Brain: How the Discovery of Mirror Neurons Changes Our Understanding of Human Nature
 Christian Keysers



Crossing disciplinary boundaries

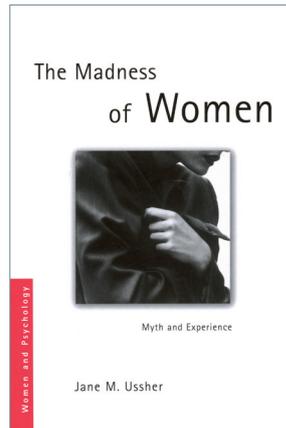
Rethinking School Bullying: Towards an Integrated Model
Roz Dixon

The question of how anti-bullying interventions can be improved has been a central concern for those studying bullying since the phenomenon was first recognised as a problem for schools. Different answers to this question have been provided by those working in education, psychology, counselling and health.

In the present book the author outlines a systemic model for tackling bullying, which draws together the different ways in which bullying has been studied. The model focuses at varying theoretical levels on the processes that underpin bullying, and therefore provides a means by which practitioners and academics from a range of disciplines can inform each other's thinking. The model is largely motivated and illustrated by the author's own published research.

The style of the book is likely to make it most accessible to academics with a knowledge of research in the area, in that it concentrates on explaining the author's systemic model rather than giving a thorough account of previous research. The central message of the book is nevertheless convincing: we need to work together if we are to deal with bullying effectively.

Cambridge University Press; 2011; Hb £55.00
Reviewed by Siân E. Jones
who is a PhD student at Cardiff University



One side of a debate

The Madness of Women: Myth and Experience
Jane M. Ussher

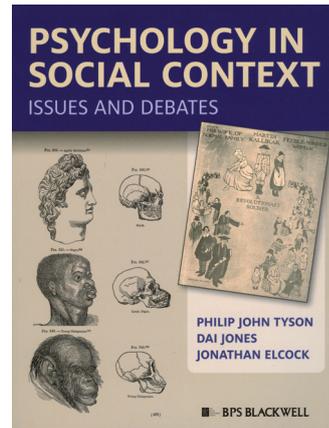
This book raised a few eyebrows on the tube. The provocative title reflects the book's stance, that women are disadvantaged by a social construction of madness that makes them more vulnerable to psychiatric labelling and drug prescription.

As is usual in the qualitative research tradition, Ussher begins with a personal account, 'outing' her own perspective. Subsequent chapters present an extensively analysed research literature. Ussher delineates feminist ideas that tend to get lost in the busy world of NHS targets and the searching for a solvable problem.

Ussher writes persuasively and clearly, using nuggets of examples to provoke thought. However, her own views sometimes came across too obviously, particularly in the first part of the book, tending to push me into position of devil's advocate.

Although I might have liked a more balanced perspective, this was a fascinating and evidence-based book, which never claims to be representing two sides of a debate. I think Ussher might argue that her side of the argument needs more airtime in the psychiatric climate it is being voiced in, and perhaps she is right.

Routledge; 2011; Pb £19.95
Reviewed by Lucy Maddox
who is a Chartered Clinical Psychologist at the Michael Rutter Centre for Children and Young People, London



Compelling

Psychology in Social Context: Issues and Debates
Philip John Tyson, Dai Jones & Jonathan Elcock

This introduction to critical psychology explores some of the key areas in the history and current practice of the discipline. It is an extremely well structured tour, aimed at psychology students, with each chapter bookended by learning outcomes, thinking points and further reading.

The authors identify the prejudices and assumptions that are the implicit basis of much of mainstream psychology. It is really brought alive by the historical illustrations, vividly illustrating the social context in which psychology operates. I was disappointed that they did not go on to offer any alternatives; for example, any discussion of an explicitly black or feminist psychology, or ideas of how psychology could be used as a force for social change

rather than yet another way of perpetuating social inequality.

I also struggled with some of the subject choices, which seemed to be based on an assumption of a white, male mainstream even though in some areas of psychology, women are the mainstream; and sexual orientation is almost absent, except as a psychiatric diagnosis. It was surprising to see a whole chapter on parapsychology but no mention of religion, given the interesting ways in which it has been both the mainstream and the oppressed at different times.

These issues aside, this is a compelling and wide-ranging book that encourages the reader to look for the moral values and cultural assumptions at the heart of the apparently unbiased science that is psychology.

Wiley-Blackwell; 2011;
Pb: £26.99

Reviewed by Emma Taylor
who is a clinical psychologist in eating disorders services

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