

How we understand others

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Empathy and the ability to understand what other people know, plan and want are interrelated. And sometimes one skill inhibits the other.

People who empathise easily with others do not necessarily understand them well. To the contrary: Excessive empathy can even impair understanding as a new study conducted by psychologists from

Würzburg and Leipzig has established.

Imagine your best friend tells you that his girlfriend has just proposed "staying friends". Now you have to accomplish two things: Firstly, you have to grasp that this nice sounding proposition actually means that she wants to break up with him and secondly, you should feel with your friend and comfort him.

Whether empathy and understanding other people's mental states (mentalising)—i.e. the ability to understand what others know, plan and want—are interrelated has recently been examined by the psychologists Anne Böckler, Philipp Kanske, Mathis Trautwein, Franca Parianen-Lesemann and Tania Singer.

The publication

Anne Böckler has been a junior professor at the University of Würzburg's Institute of Psychology since October 2015. Previously, the post-doc had worked in the Department of Social Neurosciences at the Max Planck Institute of Human Cognitive and Brain Sciences in Leipzig where she conducted the study together with her co-workers. In the scientific journal *Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience*, the scientists present the results of their work.

"Successful social interaction is based on our ability to feel with others and to understand their thoughts and intentions," Anne Böckler explains. She says that it had been unclear previously whether and to what extent these two skills were interrelated—that is whether people who empathise easily with others are also capable of grasping their thoughts and intentions. According to the junior professor, the scientists also looked into the question of whether the neuronal networks responsible for these abilities interact.

The results

Answers can be gleaned from the study conducted by Anne Böckler, Philipp Kanske and their colleagues at the Max Planck Institute in Leipzig within the scope of a large-scale study led by Tania Singer which included some 200 participants. The study enabled the scientists to prove that people who tend to be empathic do not necessarily understand other people well at a cognitive level. Hence, [social skills](#) seem to be based on multiple abilities that are rather independent of one another.

The study also delivered new insight as to how the different networks in the brain are orchestrated, revealing that networks crucial for empathy and cognitive perspective-taking interact with one another. In highly emotional moments—for example when somebody talks about the death of a close person—activation of the insula, which forms part of the empathy-relevant network, can have an inhibiting effect in some people on brain areas important for taking someone else's perspective. And this in turn can cause excessive empathy to impair social understanding.

The study

The participants to the study watched a number of video sequences in which the narrator was more or less emotional. Afterwards, they had to rate how they felt and how much compassion they felt for the person in the film. Then they had to answer questions about the video—for example what the persons could have thought, known or intended. Having thus identified persons with a high level of empathy, the psychologists looked at their portion among the test participants who had had good or poor results in the test about cognitive perspective-taking—and vice versa.

Using functional magnetic resonance imaging, the scientists observed

which areas of the brain were active at what time.

The significance

The authors believe that the results of this study are important both for neuroscience and clinical applications. For example, they suggest that training aimed at improving social skills, the willingness to empathise and the ability to understand others at the cognitive level and take their perspective should be promoted selectively and separately of one another. The group in the Department of Social Neurosciences in Leipzig is currently working on exactly this topic within the scope of the ReSource project, namely how to specifically train different social skills.

Provided by University of Würzburg

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