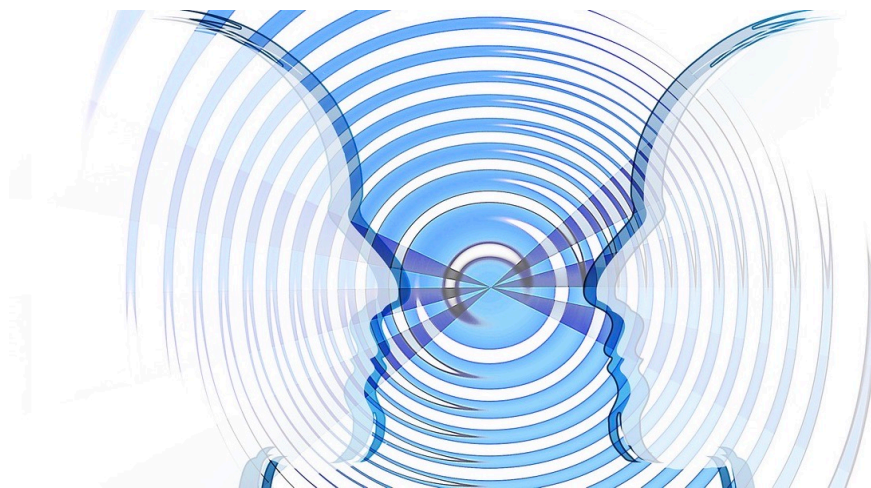


PRESS RELEASE

Empathic and altruistic or cold and individualistic: our brains reveal the truth

The way the brain encodes information in social contexts enables us to distinguish between collaborative, caring personalities and those that are less empathic. This is the finding of a piece of research by SISSA published in NeuroImage.



Trieste, 12 May 2021

Are you empathic, generous and altruistic? In short, do you possess that specific personality trait defined as agreeableness in the language of psychologists? New research from SISSA recently published in the journal *NeuroImage* sheds light on brain mechanisms underlying this trait. The study showed that detached and individualistic subjects seem to process information associated with social and non-social contexts in similar ways, as demonstrated by similar activation patterns in the prefrontal cortex, whereas in more agreeable subjects the activation patterns arising from social and non-social situations show more differences. This suggests that individuals with high levels of agreeableness are able to discern social contents that are important, and particularly informative, for achieving successful interactions with others. This should not be surprising, since individual agreeableness is associated with characteristics, such as empathy, cooperation and generosity, which require the ability to recognise the cognitive, emotional and motivational aspects of others in social situations. These findings could contribute to future development of more objective and sensitive

personality tests, including individuals' brain responses to stimuli varying in social content as a measure of agreeableness. The research was carried out by Dr. Sandra Arbula and Elisabetta Pisanu, and coordinated by Professor Raffaella I. Rumiati.

Visual tests and functional magnetic resonance imaging

"Personality traits reflect key aspects of variability among individuals. Understanding the mechanisms that give rise to these differences requires an in depth investigation of the behaviors associated with such traits, and their underlying neural sources" explain the scientists. The SISSA team recruited dozens of volunteers for their research according to their degree of agreeableness, one of the five major dimensions of personality, assessed with a questionnaire. "Participants were presented with short animations of different shapes that moved randomly or interacted in a socially meaningful way. Their brain activity was then recorded using functional magnetic resonance imaging, which enables detection of brain areas activated while they perform a given task, and has application in both research and clinical fields".

An important link between neural mechanisms and social behaviour

"Our results suggest something particularly interesting about agreeableness" explain Arbula and Rumiati. "We observed that representations of social information extracted from visual scenes are formed in the dorsomedial prefrontal cortex: based on their distinctiveness we are able to predict individual variations in agreeableness. The present finding reveals the link between neural and behavioral mechanisms underlying this specific personality trait" conclude Arbula and Rumiati. "Additionally, these sorts of connections provide new opportunities for the development of more objective personality measures".

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[Full paper](#)

IMAGE

Credit: Gerd Altman on Pixabay

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