

Hug the Monkey

November 17, 2009

Autism Gene Linked to Empathy

A variation in a gene for the oxytocin receptor helps determine how much empathy a person has, according to a new study.

Sarina Rodrigues, assistant professor of psychology at Oregon State University and Laura Saslow, a UC Berkeley psychology graduate student, compared four variations in the OXTR gene. They found that people who inherited one specific combo were much more likely to be able to identify emotions in the "mind-reading" test, and also described themselves as generally mellow and less likely to get stressed.

From the UC Berkeley press release:

All humans inherit a variation of this gene or "allele" from each parent. The UC Berkeley study looked at the three combinations of gene variations of the oxytocin receptor. The most empathetic – able to get an accurate read on others' emotions – had two copies of the "G allele." In contrast, members of the AA and AG allele groups were found to be less capable of putting themselves in the shoes of others and more likely to get stressed out in difficult situations.

This study is a counterpoint to the recent research from Duke University showing that differences in the methylation of genes that regulate the expression of oxytocin receptors correlated with autism.

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