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## Behavior/Humans

### Genes May Determine Our Ability to Empathize

It's obvious that some people don't have it

By **Tudor Vieru**, Science Editor  
 18th of November 2009, 00:20 GMT

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We've all been in situations in which the person we were talking to seemed oblivious to the fact that we looked sick and not in the mood, and just kept on ranting for hours on end. The ability to empathize – that is, to figure out what other people are feeling without them saying it, and to relate to their state – is clearly something that only a part of the population has. A new study now adds weight to something that researchers hypothesized a long time ago, namely the fact that the root of empathy is genetic, and therefore inherited.

One of the substances that experts thought to be responsible for this trait was oxytocin. In previous experiments, participants playing a game under the influence of increased doses of the substance showed a lot more trust in each other. A variant (polymorphism) of the gene that triggers the production of oxytocin receptors was recently proven to play an important part in the development of autism, a disease that is known to make its sufferers unable to handle social interactions normally. The polymorphism, called rs53576, may be what causes empathy differences in the general population.

The new idea belongs to Oregon State University (OSU) neuropsychologist Sarina Rodrigues. She and her team used a tool known as the Reading the Mind in the Eyes Test, to assess the levels of empathy in 192 college students. A cropped photo of an actor's eyes was displayed on a computer screen, and all the participants needed to select between four words that were shown alongside the image. The word selected needed to match the expression of the eyes best. It was known even before the test that autistic patients performed poorly at this type of tasks. Patients that in previous studies received a snort of oxytocin before the test performed better than those who were given a placebo.

Details of the new investigation appear in the November 16 online issue of the scientific journal Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (PNAS), [ScienceNow](#) reports. The investigators showed that students sporting the "G" version of the rs53576 variant made about 23 percent less mistakes in correctly identifying the expressions in the eyes of the actor than those with the "A" version, which is common among autistic patients. "Some of us have a natural capacity to be more empathic than others and that some people are more naturally closed-off and detached," Rodrigues concludes.

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