The building blocks of empathy

On 20th September at SISSA Jean Decety will explain the biological origins of this basic social skill

Empathy is what makes us human: it is the ability to reflect ourselves in other people’s emotions and what creates that fundamental cohesion at the basis of our society. The ability to be empathic originates in our brain, in ancient and basic structures making up the material of which even very complex forms of empathy are made. This is what Jean Decety, one of the world’s most prominent experts in this field, will be talking about in a lecture to be held on 20th September at SISSA.

Without empathy we would not be able to get emotionally moved when we watch a movie, we would not try to comfort someone in tears, we would not reply smiling to someone who is smiling at us. We would not be many of those things which make us human and let us feel similar to our fellow creatures. We would not even be able to build up a society. Empathy is the ability to
instinctively feel other people’s emotions “as if” they were ours. Jean Decety, neuroscientist at the University of Chicago, is one of the world’s most prominent experts in this field. “Maybe the greatest worldwide” stated Giorgia Silani, one of the neuroscientists at SISSA who organized the lecture, together with Raffaella Rumiati, Professor at SISSA. “We have invited Decety because we also study the biological bases of empathy here at SISSA. His contribution in this field is therefore crucial, we are honoured he has accepted our invitation”.

Decety will be holding a speech with the title “Empathy and empathic concern – Evolution, neurobiological mechanism and implications in the practice of medicine”. According to Decety’s theory, there are structures in our brain able to elaborate basic forms of empathy. Those structures are very old and connected to subcortical and “sub-hormonal” mechanisms at the core of our nervous system. These ancient structures could derive from primordial selective pressures associated to functions which are very important to us as human beings, such as communication, parental care and social attachment. From those basic structures, very complex and evolved forms of empathy could derive.

“The study of the material which makes up empathy is important even in clinical practice,” stated Decety. “Indeed, empathy is related to clear benefits both for physicians and for patients. It could have an additional use in patients’ care”.

For an interview with Decety, please contact our press office.

Jean Decety is Professor at the Psychology Department of the University of Chicago and he is one of the world’s most prominent experts in empathy. He is also an editor of the journal Social Neuroscience and member of the editorial board of other important journals, such as Neuropsychologia, Frontiers in Emotion Science and of the Scientific World Journal.

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