

SOCIAL COGNITION IN SCHIZOPHRENIA

MARTIN BRÜNE

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The term “social cognition” refers to the ability to represent one’s own and others mental states in terms of beliefs, desires, knowledge, intentions and feelings. In its broader meaning social cognition also embraces the perception of emotions from facial expressions, body posture and prosody. “Hardware” components that are necessary for social cognitive processes comprise a neural network that entails cerebral midline structures including the medial prefrontal cortex, the precuneus, the temporo-parietal junction and limbic structures such as the anterior cingulate cortex and the anterior insula. These brain circuits contain cells that seem to be specific to gregarious animals, especially primates. Research into the mirror neuron system and von Economo neurons has received great attention in the recent past. Numerous studies have shown that people with schizophrenia have profound deficits in one or the

other aspect within the social cognitive domain. For example, schizophrenia patients have difficulties in appreciating the mental states of other individuals, they are often impaired in reflecting upon own mental states, and hence have difficulties in making sense of other people’s behaviour.

This presentation highlights some new findings regarding social cognition in schizophrenia, most of which have theoretically been derived from insights of evolutionary theory and the evolved function of social cognitive abilities.



Martin Brüne

*Department of Psychiatry,
University of Bochum,
LWL University -Hospital,
Alexandrinenstr. 1, 4479
Bochum, Germany*

E-mail: martin.brune@rub.de

Martin Brüne is a professor of psychiatry and director of the Research in Cognitive Neuropsychiatry. He completed training in neurology in 1993 and in psychiatry in 1995. His main research interests concern various aspects of social cognition, in particular in schizophrenia and other psychoses. He co-edited the book “The social brain: Evolution and pathology” in 2003, and current research includes analyses of the association of social cognition with social function, nonverbal behavior, insight, and social prognosis in psychosis. He is also involved in cross-cultural research on delusions, and has longstanding interest in the evolutionary aspects of psychiatric disorders. He is the author of the recent “Textbook of evolutionary psychiatry”, published by OUP in 2009.