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TRACKING TRENDS & PERFORMANCE IN BASIC RESEARCH

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2009 : January 2009 - Fast Moving Fronts : Amy Pinkham & David L. Penn

FAST MOVING FRONTS - 2009

January 2009



Amy Pinkham & David L. Penn talk with *ScienceWatch.com* and answer a few questions about this month's Fast Moving Front in the field of Psychiatry/Psychology.



Article: Implications for the neural basis of social cognition for the study of schizophrenia

Authors: Pinkham, AE; Penn, DL; Perkins, DO; Lieberman, J

Journal: AMER J PSYCHIAT, 160 (5): 815-824, MAY 2003

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SW: Why do you think your paper is highly cited?

It reviews an area that has grown in interest in **schizophrenia** research: social cognition. Also, it is relevant to those interested in translational research, given its focus on neural mechanisms.

SW: Does it describe a new discovery, methodology, or synthesis of knowledge?

It is more of a synthesis/review of a specific area. We wanted to get a handle on the neural underpinnings of social cognition in schizophrenia. A number of studies had investigated the neural mechanisms of social cognitive processing in healthy individuals, and a few other studies had begun to investigate these same neural circuits in schizophrenia.

Not surprisingly, these early studies demonstrated abnormal neural processing in schizophrenia. We felt the paper would have heuristic value for us and other researchers by providing a theoretical model of social cognitive impairment in schizophrenia in which deficits are subserved by abnormal activation of key structures in the social cognitive network or "social brain."

SW: Would you summarize the significance of your paper in layman's terms?

The paper summarizes the neural mechanisms underlying why individuals with schizophrenia have difficulty processing social information. In other words, what neural factors contribute to their problems in understanding and perceiving others facial affect and intentions.

SW: How did you become involved in this research and were any particular problems encountered along the way?



Coauthor
David L. Penn

I (David L. Penn) have been doing this research since I was a graduate student at the University of Nebraska Lincoln in the late 1980s. At the time, there was interest in cognition in schizophrenia. I wondered if there was a domain of cognition more proximal to behavior; one that would help us understand the social deficits of the disorder, which I think are the core impairments of schizophrenia. The only problem I encountered early in my career (and through the late 1990s) was skepticism from the scientific community that social cognition was a worthy area of study. That has changed, however, over the past decade, as more and more research has demonstrated that social cognition is indeed closely related to social behavior and that social cognition is distinct from general cognitive abilities.

SW: Where do you see your research leading in the future?

I (David L. Penn) am working on two areas: first, how can we improve social cognition in schizophrenia? We have developed a social cognition group treatment, "social cognition and interaction training" (SCIT) that has, thus far, displayed promising results in improving both social cognition and social functioning in schizophrenia.

Second, we (Pinkham and Penn) are also exploring the similarities/differences in social cognition in schizophrenia and **autism**, a neurodevelopmental disorder that is characterized by prominent deficits in social functioning and social cognition. By comparing these two disorders, we hope to begin to clarify the means by which two disorders with different developmental pathways can have similar social cognitive outcomes. Further, this information may not only shed light on the developmental neural mechanisms of social cognition, but also offers the opportunity to inform our understanding of abnormalities at the level of brain-behavior interactions in both schizophrenia and autism.

SW: Do you foresee any social or political implications for your research?

Ultimately, we want to help people function better and enjoy a better quality of life.

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