



## PRESS RELEASE

Geneva | 25 of April 2018

# No future for egoists – that’s what their brain says!

UNIGE researchers analysed the cerebral activity of egotistical people, discovering that they do not think about the future if it seems too far off to concern them.

**Some people are worried about the future consequences of climate change, while others consider them too remote to have an impact on their well-being. Researchers at the University of Geneva (UNIGE), Switzerland, examined how these differences are reflected in our brains. With the help of neuro-imaging, the scientists found that people deemed «egotistical» do not use the area of the brain that enables us to look into and imagine the distant future. In «altruistic» individuals, on the other hand, the same area is alive with activity. The research results, published in the journal *Cognitive, Affective & Behavioural Neuroscience*, may help psychologists devise exercises that put this specific area of the brain to work. These could be used to improve people’s ability to project themselves into the future and raise their awareness of, for example, the effects of climate change.**

The concerns experienced by human beings are built on their values, which determine whether individuals prioritize their personal well-being or put themselves on an equal footing with their peers. In order to encourage as many people as possible to adopt “sustainable” behaviour, it is thus necessary that they feel the consequences of climate change are relevant to them. Some individuals – who are more self-centred – do not worry about the consequences, believing that these potential disasters are too far off.

“We wondered what magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) could teach us about how the brain processes information about the future impact of climate change, and how this mechanism differs depending on the self-centeredness of the individual,” says Tobias Brosch, professor in the Psychology Section at UNIGE’s Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences (FPSE).

### **Are egoists only afraid of what directly concerns them?**

The UNIGE psychologists turned to the report drawn up by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, where they identified predictions about the outcomes of climate change, such as a reduction in drinking water supplies, an increase in border conflicts and a spike in natural disasters. They then assigned a year in the future to each of these effects, stating when it would come to pass.

Brosch’s team invited a panel of participants to complete a standardized questionnaire to measure the value hierarchies, marking the selfish or altruistic tendencies of each individual. One by one, the participants underwent an MRI before being shown the dated



High definition pictures

consequences of the events; they then had to answer two questions on a scale of 1 to 8: Is it serious? Are you afraid?

“The first result we obtained was that for people with egotistical tendencies, the near future is much more worrying than the distant future, which will only come about after they are dead. In altruistic people, this difference disappears, since they see the seriousness as being the same”, explains Brosch.

### **Selfishness makes the brain lazy**

The psychologists then focused on the activity in the ventromedial pre-frontal cortex (vmPFC), an area of the brain above the eyes that is used when thinking about the future and trying to visualize it. “We found that with altruistic people, this cerebral zone is activated more forcefully when the subject is confronted with the consequences of a distant future as compared to the near future. By contrast, in an egotistical person, there is no increase in activity between a consequence in the near future and one in the distant future,” says Brosch.

This particular region of the brain is mainly used for projecting oneself into the distant future. The absence of heightened activity in a self-centred person indicates the absence of projection and the fact that the individual does not feel concerned by what will happen after his or her death. Why, then, should such people adopt sustainable forms of behaviour?

### **Set your projection capabilities to work**

These outcomes, which can be applied to areas other than climate change, demonstrate the importance of being able to think about the distant future in order to adapt one’s behaviour to the future constraints of the world. “We could imagine a psychological training that would work on this brain area using projection exercises,” suggests Brosch. “In particular, we could use virtual reality, which would make the tomorrow’s world visible to everyone, bringing human beings closer to the consequences of their actions.”

**UNIVERSITÉ DE GENÈVE**  
**Communication Department**  
24 rue du Général-Dufour  
CH-1211 Genève 4  
Tél. +41 22 379 77 17  
media@unige.ch  
www.unige.ch

## contact

### **Tobias Brosch**

Professor in the Psychology Section  
FPSE

+41 22 379 92 23  
Tobias.Brosch@unige.ch

**DOI:** 10.3758/s13415-018-0581-9