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What does your research focus on?

My general research area is at the intersection of psychology and cognitive and social neuroscience in health and neurological disease. Combining different high-resolution brain imaging techniques with psychophysics, my research focuses on body language, unconscious effects of pair-bonding (such as love) on embodied cognition, and the role of the mirror neuron system in understanding desires, intentions and actions of other people while in social settings. The emphasis is on elucidating the brain dynamics of embodied cognition, its role, and its modulations as a function of pair-bonding levels and social contexts. Connecting psychological models of self-expansion and embodied cognition with neuroimaging, I aim to develop predictive models of automatic (pre-conscious) cognitive information processing in order to improve one's performance during social interactions. Understanding how intentions of others are pre-consciously understood can also provide critical insights to help individuals who suffer from chronic interpersonal disorders, such as autism.

What drew you to this line of research? Why is it exciting to you?

I was drawn to my current work largely because it allows me to combine my interests in cognitive and social neuroscience with my passion in the human brain. I have always enjoyed the rigor and complexity of both fields. Combining cognitive and social neuroscience with well-specified psychological models is exciting to me because it is the essence of psychological sciences. Also, it allows me to better understand the neural underpinnings of social cognition and to find some keys to translate and apply neuroscientific results from lab-bench to Society.

Who were/are your mentors or psychological influences?

I have benefited enormously at different stages of my career from working with one person in particular: Scott Grafton. Scott has taught me to apply rigor, methodology and perseverance to my data recordings, analysis and reports. Both he and Michael Gazzaniga have also taught me to see "outside of the box", and to always end the analysis of my results by systematically asking myself what I now consider to be one of the most important questions in science, "And so What?"

My thinking about social embodied cognition, intention understanding, pair-bonding, and application of my findings to clinical populations has been most heavily influenced by several brilliant people, who have an extraordinary passion for their work and excel in psychological science, medicine, and/or neuroscience. Among academics, here are only a few of them: Theodor Landis, Giacomo Rizzolatti,

Elaine Hatfield, Jean Decety, John Cacioppo, Francesco Bianchi-Demicheli, George Langford, and Steve Pinker.

To what do you attribute your success in the science?

As the racecar driver, Mario Andretti, would say: “Desire is the key to motivation, but it’s the determination and commitment to an unrelenting pursuit of your goal – a commitment to excellence – that is a key to success”. Psychological science is my passion, and perfectionism is my driving force. In other words, I enjoy what I do, which makes it easy to spend many hours on the research that interests me. I like theorizing, making hypotheses, testing these hypotheses, and re-testing them again and again. Also, I have an unbelievably supportive department and university, as well as visionary funding agencies/foundations who support my work and ideas.

What’s your future research agenda?

My goal for the years to come is to gain a deeper understanding of how implicit perception modulates social cognition. Furthermore, I would like to expand the methodologies that I use in my research program to neurological diseases in order to help people in need.

Any advice for even younger psychologists? What would you tell someone just now entering graduate school or getting their PhD?

Getting and being a PhD is a journey, not a destination, so enjoy the trip! In your luggage, bring some passion, rigor, creativity and motivation... Don’t forget to also take some classic textbooks written by the most successful in the field to guide you on your way to knowledge and discovery. Also, keep in mind the absence of results is not the evidence of absence. Don’t be discouraged by non-significant results in your experiment. Rather, try to understand their meaning, and integrate them in your models to build on a new hypothesis that would help you grow and make new psychological hypothesis.

What publication you are most proud of or feel has been most important to your career?

My best paper is always my upcoming paper. More seriously, I like all my papers, but I am most proud I think of the paper titled “Implicit priming of embodied cognition on human motor intention understanding in dyads in love, Journal of Social and Personal Relationships” (November 2010, vol. 27 no. 7, pp. 1001-1015). I particularly like this paper because it reinforces our results published in Social Neuroscience in 2006, and demonstrates the power of love on the human social cognition. It has also inspired a few hypotheses that are part of some of my current research projects.