

Emile Bruneau: Putting Neuroscience to Work for Peace

Emile Bruneau could serve as a poster child for an individual whose professional interests are driven by their personal experience and their conviction that it is possible to change the world for the better within their professional field—in his case, through neuroscience. His work is mainly inspired by serendipitous overseas experiences during which he got the conviction that many intergroup conflicts around the globe have common origins: some of them structural (e.g., history of violence, scarce resources, physical separation), and some of them psychological. Emile Bruneau's work focuses on the latter, the psychological component of intergroup conflicts and peace interventions. At the MIT, he explores these topics with the tools of social psychology and neuroimaging.

The main question Emile Bruneau researches is how psychological biases between hostile groups can be overcome. Apparently, common sense interventions that do not take into consideration the psychological predisposition of the parties involved can make conflicts deteriorate. The goal is to screen and identify different types of individuals involved in certain conflicts, to develop targeted campaigns for alleviating their hatred and biases, and to evaluate the effect of model interventions on the target groups. Ultimately, Emile Bruneau hopes to use distinct behavioral interventions to reach large numbers of different stakeholders in conflicts all over the globe.

But how can this goal be achieved?—A crucial concept Emile Bruneau introduced is the human brain as the rider on top of an elephant: the consciously accessible part of your brain is the rider. This is the part of our brains that can reflect on behavior and thinking and that intentionally “directs the elephant,” to keep to the metaphor. The biggest part of our brains, the “elephant,” however, is not explicitly accessible. This is the unconscious, irrational part of the human brain. In order to gather knowledge on how intergroup conflicts can be alleviated, resolved, or prevented, Emile Bruneau pays much attention to the “elephant.” Common-sense interventions, he explained, have a small intended effect on the “rider” and a large unintended effect on the “elephant.” In other words, in order to find out what really works, one has to “ask the elephant.” And to do so, he uses brain imaging.

According to Emile Bruneau, “the brain [sometimes gives] a totally different answer” than information obtained via interviews or self-ratings. Thus, he aims at translating research like Emily Falk's studies on consumer behavior to the field of conflict resolution. That is, neural focus groups provide information on the usefulness of specific campaigns in certain individuals who stand for a broader social group. Neuro-diagnostics can be used to “diagnose” different individuals with the type of campaign they would most likely be susceptible to. And, finally, understanding the neuronal correlates of bias, that is, “finding the ‘how’” of hostility, can further benefit the design and introduction of effective conflict resolution campaigns.

Two studies (2010; 2012) have already provided Emil Bruneau and his team with evidence that their approach is fruitful. One study on empathy towards ingroup, outgroup, and distant group members, as seen from a perspective of the conflict in the Middle East (Arabs, Israelites, South Americans), suggested that the brain response for seeing others suffer, for instance, is

almost identical for both in- and outgroup members, and significantly lower for distant group individuals. These measurements stand in stark contrast to the self-reported level of empathy: the subjects reported much less empathy for the despised outgroup members, more for distant group members, and the most for ingroup members. Obviously, asking the “elephant” revealed that, brain-wise, love and hatred are much closer together than the self-reports would suggest.

Apart from methodological criticisms (reverse inference?), one question that comes to mind is: If neuroimaging proves to be useful in determining the outcome of campaigns by “diagnosing” the susceptibility of populations to a certain type of intervention, (how) can the misuse of this research be prevented?—If one can put it to work for peace, then certainly as well for ideological indoctrination, war, and capitalism.