

From Me to You: Emotional Contagion in Primates and Other Social Mammals

Elisabetta Palagi

Natural History Museum, University of Pisa, Italy

E-Mail: beta.palagi@museo.unipi.it

Humans live completely nestled in an emotional network that makes us socially interdependent beings. But in this “emotional sphere” we are not alone. Animals experience and express emotions, too. This is now a matter of fact, not speculation anymore. The study of emotions requires a multi-disciplinary approach because many internal and external factors concur in triggering and modulating the emotional outcome to social and environmental stimuli. One of the most fertile fields of research is the facial and bodily motor expression of emotions, including how human and non-human animals are able to perceive others’ emotions by mimicking the same motor pattern making such emotion manifest. The same face–same emotion mechanism is an extremely adaptive phenomenon that is based on the perception-action coupling mechanism mediated by the mirror neuron system. Mimicry regulates dyadic relations and favours the formation of strong, enduring social bonds, which in turn enhance reproductive success. Considering the importance that facial mimicry may play in sharing emotions and regulating social interactions, it has been proposed that this phenomenon may be more widespread than previously thought and not confined to humans. In the last decades, many researchers have become increasingly aware that the only possible way to understand even the most complex forms of human empathy was to look at other branches on the evolutionary tree. As a result of this new interest, some convincing data have emerged on similar phenomena in non-human species. In this talk, I will review and present original observational and experimental data showing how, in primate and non-primate species, facial mimicry and yawn contagion are good regulators of social interactions and reliable predictors of emotional closeness. The ability to be infected by others’ emotions via mirroring facial expressions is a feature shared between humans and other social species. This should help us keep in mind that we are, in fact, at base and at most, animals.