

Title: From Birth to Battle: The Oxytocinergic Circuitry as Neurobiological Foundation of Group Cooperation and Conflict

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Abstract: Well-known for its role in reproduction, stress-regulation, and pair-bonding, recent work implicates the ancient and evolutionary highly preserved neuropeptide oxytocin also in social recognition, trust, and pro-social behavior more generally. From an evolutionary perspective, it follows that pro-social approach is parochial—it extends to close kin and kith and not, or to a lesser degree, to non-kin and kith. Indeed, humans given oxytocin rather than placebo extend trust towards protagonists with whom they shared positive interactions, and those who are displayed as relatively trustworthy. Here I present neuroimaging and behavioral decision experiments from our own laboratory showing that intranasal oxytocin (versus placebo) motivates (i) in-group favoritism, but not out-group derogation, (ii) parochial altruism, and (iii) defensive aggression towards outsiders threatening vulnerable in-group members. I conclude with broader implications for social neuroscience research and theory on intergroup relations and conflict.