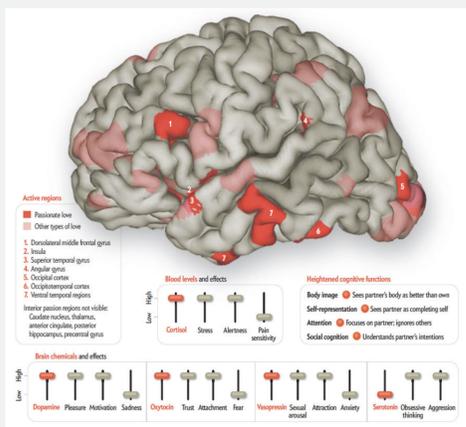


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## Background

In the past twenty years 'social neuroscience' research findings have become increasingly prominent in the media, politics and policy. New studies often make claims about our brains being the location of complex personal life phenomena, for example seeing love, deception, sexuality and even political persuasion as circuits of neurons and chemicals or as being produced by specific regions of the brain.



Moreover, there has been an increase in the invention of drugs to treat 'abnormal behaviours' such as panic, ADHD, sleeping problems, and so on, that have found new targets in less clearly pathological contexts, so that phenomena such as 'shyness' become medicalised. At the same time, this intensification of the capacity to alter our moods and behaviours appears to correspond with a demand to adjust, readjust and enhance our somatic existence according to our own desires. We have, according to Nikolas Rose (2003) and colleagues, become 'neurochemical selves', increasingly responsible for our own projects of neurological selfhood.

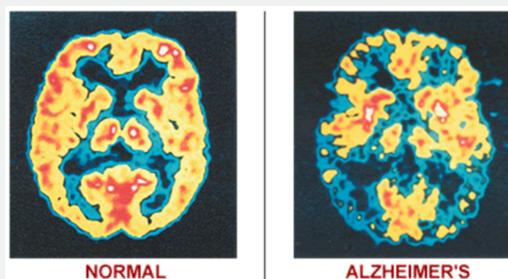


<http://www.ebrainsupplements.com/>

However, theses of the importance of the somatic in contemporary life are yet to empirically explore the ways in which the brain is understood as an important location in our ageing and becoming ill and in the changes we experience in our selves as we grow older.

## Understanding ageing brains

Sociologies of ageing, though quite well-developed, have yet to examine how those suffering from dementia negotiate the meaning of their health and illness in relation to their brains. Sociology of neuroscience, on the other hand, has only recently emerged as a field of study and is currently lacking in empirically informed work. Its concentration has been too narrowly focussed on the neuroscientists producing knowledge and not on those about whom information is produced.



Work on ageing and technology has been focussed on the 'medicalisation' thesis, which contends that previously 'normal' ageing has become understood as a failure to be remedied through biomedical intervention. This work has, for instance, examined phenomena such as the use of cosmetics and the rise of the cosmetics industry.

Alongside this, work on 'biologisation' and 'neurologisation' argues that our bodies, genes and brains are ever more central to the management and meaningfulness of our daily lives. This has particular implications for rooting our understanding of our mental health in our genes and brains. One aim of my research is to link the sociologies of ageing and neuroscience.

## Questions

- 1) how do neuroscientists conceive of the personal lives of dementia sufferers?
- 2) how is information about the brain communicated?
- 3) how do dementia sufferers and their carers make sense of their brains in their daily lives?

## Opportunities for an intersubjective neuroscience

Using detailed empirical case studies, scholars of personal life have begun to challenge and nuance one of the major theories of the zeitgeist, that being the 'individualisation thesis', (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995), or the argument that contemporary Western subjects experience their lives as reflexive projects to be steered towards one's own goals and determinations. This approach sees governance and everyday life as being highly individual, so that we are increasingly capable of making only fleeting relationships, and being concerned primarily with the fluidity of our lives and independence (Bauman, 2000).

The hypothesis of the neurochemical self seems to embed some of this individualisation. The idea that we are increasingly responsible for the modulation of our brains as a process for producing better life projects underwrites and makes use of the notion of reflexive individualism in service of neurochemical self-enhancement.

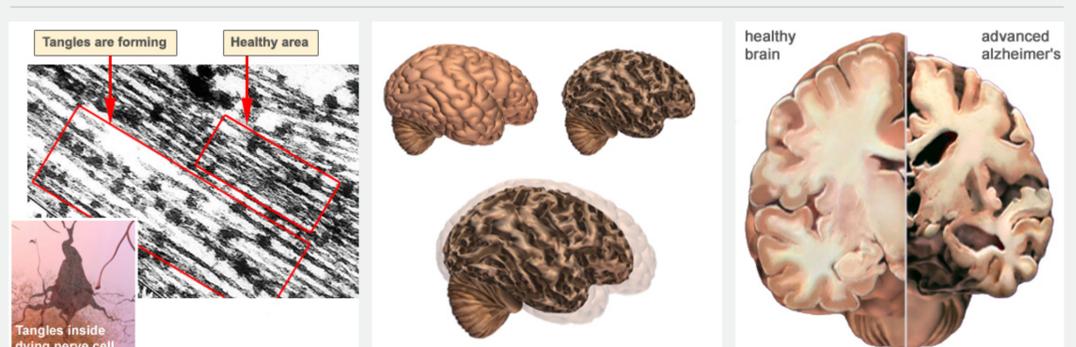


In contrast to this hyper-individualised outlook, insights from the sociology of personal life might prove useful to a more intersubjective neuroscience. For example, the recognition that our memories are importantly tied to other people and the spaces and objects of our everyday lives (Smart 2007) offers an opportunity to explore memory as an intersubjective phenomenon.

## References

- Bauman, Z. (2000) *Liquid Modernity* Polity Press, Cambridge
- Beck, U. and Beck-Gernsheim, E. (1995) *The Normal Chaos of Love* Polity Press, Cambridge
- Rose, N. (2003) *Neurochemical Selves* *Society* 41(1): 46-59
- Smart, C. (2007) *Personal Life: New Directions in Sociological Thinking* Polity Press, Cambridge

## Images of Alzheimer's



[http://www.alz.org/brain-tour/3\\_main\\_parts.asp](http://www.alz.org/brain-tour/3_main_parts.asp)