

The Role of Vicarious Activity in Perception and (Pro)Social Behavior

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Neuroimaging literature over the past two decades suggests that when we observe emotional expressions of other individuals we activate brain regions involved in our own experience of the observed emotions. For instance when we observe another individual in pain we activate brain region normally active when we get hurt ourselves, despite us not being in pain. It has been hypothesized that this vicarious activity would give us a quick intuitive spontaneous access to the feeling of other individuals by making us feel as they do. As the pain we feel when we get hurt motivates us to remove the causes of our pain, this intuitive embodied perception could serve a similar purpose motivating us to help the person in need. This hypothesis is intuitively appealing and resonates with the long standing hypothesis of Adam Smith that we help other people because we empathically feel what happens to them. In my talk I will therefore show you what happens in the brain when we observe the emotions, sensations and actions of others and how these activities contribute to perception and helping behavior.