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Opinion

The empathic brain: how, when and why?

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Recent imaging results suggest that individuals automatically share the emotions of others when exposed to their emotions. We question the assumption of the automaticity and propose a contextual approach, suggesting several modulatory factors that might influence empathic brain responses. Contextual appraisal could occur early in emotional cue evaluation, which then might or might not lead to an empathic brain response, or not until after an empathic brain response is automatically elicited. We propose two major roles for empathy; its epistemological role is to provide information about the future actions of other people, and important environmental properties. Its social role is to serve as the origin of the motivation for cooperative and prosocial behavior, as well as help for effective social communication.



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