

Moving feeling: motor and sensory processing in empathy

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A major current of research within the growing field of social neuroscience deals with ways in which sensory information is filtered by neural mechanisms that allow us to interpret aspects of social interactions, such as others' goals, intentions, and related subjective mental states. While much research has focused on the role of vision and action in such processes, one quite conspicuous and accessible social organ has been largely overlooked—the skin. Cutaneous (skin-related) perceptions such as touch and pain can carry affect-laden information influencing the feelings and attitudes of both perceiver and toucher, as well as supplying an observer with cues about the nature of the current situation. This fundamentally motivational and affective dimension of pain and touch may thus provide an important basis for interpreting others' emotions and desires, constraining inferences about observed interactions, and may even contribute to empathy. This talk discusses this proposition from a neuroscientific standpoint, presenting evidence and a theoretical framework.

