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The empathic brain and its contributions to behavior

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I will start by reviewing how over the past decades, we have shown that while we witness the actions, emotions and sensations of others, we vicariously activate brain regions involved in our own actions, emotions and sensations. After reviewing this work, I will present work from patients with psychopathy to show how that brain activity can differ in patients with core empathy deficits, and how that alerts us to the need to distinguish a propensity from an ability for empathy. I will then move on to show how our lab is now aiming to explore the functions of such brain activity by using animal models and non-invasive neuromodulation. We find that altering such vicarious brain activity reduces our propensity to catch the emotions of others, to understand the mental states of others and to help people.