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SISSA - Aula Magna

"Empathy and empathic concern - Evolution, neurobiological mechanisms and implications in the practice of medicine"

Dr. Jean Decety

Abstract:

In mammals, empathy is crucial for living in social groups and caring for others. I will consider the structural and functional organization of empathy, and propose that empathy subsumes a variety of neurobiological processes and partially dissociable information processing subsystems, each of which has a unique evolutionary history. Even the most advanced and flexible forms of empathy in humans are built on more basic forms and remain connected to core subcortical and neurohormonal mechanisms associated with affective communication, parental care and social attachment processes. In clinical practice, empathy is associated with remarkable benefits to both the patient and physician.

Jean Decety is one of the major neuroscientist specialized in the neurobiological mechanisms underpinning social cognition, particularly emotion, empathy, moral reasoning, pro-social behavior, and more generally interpersonal processes. Over the years, his research has showed that the responses of the brain to the pain of others can help us understand the function and dysfunction of empathy and morality, its development and its expression in individuals who vary in psychopathic traits. Jean Decety is an Executive Committee Member of the Center for Cognitive and Social Neuroscience, and a member of the Center for Integrative Neuroscience and Neuroengineering and a member of the Committee on Neurobiology. He is the Editor of the journal Social Neuroscience and serves on the editorial board of Neuropsychologia, Frontiers in Emotion Science, as well as the Scientific World Journal in the domain of higher level brain function.