Consciously and unconsciously feeling the pain of others

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It is now well documented that seeing other people in pain activates some of the same brain network as the physical perception of pain. We refer to this as vicarious pain (or empathy for pain). There is considerable controversy as to how to interpret this evidence. Is it really pain or something related to pain (e.g. negative affect)? Why is it important to share someone’s pain, as opposed to simply knowing about it? My own research takes a novel approach to exploring these topics by contrasting people who report conscious experiences of vicarious pain to those who do not (this relates to my earlier research on mirror-touch synaesthesia). Consciously feeling the pain of others is surprisingly common and we show it comes in two forms: one that is sensory and localised, and another that is affective and generalised. I demonstrate that these are linked to different neural signatures and networks in the brain, and a different profile of cognitive and social abilities. Our research shows that rather than taking a ‘one size fits all’ approach, these individual differences in experience lead to a richer understanding of the role of shared representations (and their modulating mechanisms) in social behaviour and embodied cognition.