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Understanding clinical conditions through the lens of social neuroscience

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Human behavior is motivated not only by primary rewards (such as food), but also by social rewards (such as approval). In the last decade, a fundamental challenge has been to understand the different aspects involved in reward processing. While animal research has clearly established "wanting" and "liking" as two components differing on the neurobiological and neurochemical level, corresponding research in humans is less conclusive. The present talk addresses this gap of knowledge by testing: a) whether "wanting" and "liking" can be dissociated in humans on the behavioral and neurochemical level for non-social and social rewards; and b) whether such components are differently impaired in clinical and neurodevelopmental conditions. By employing a novel translational behavioral paradigm, which included trial-by-trial anticipation and consumption of matched primary social (affiliative touch) and non-social (real food) stimuli, in combination with pharmacological manipulations (i.e. dopamine and opioid antagonists), we first aimed at differentially targeting these two components. Next, the same paradigm combined with fMRI was used to investigate reward processing in autism and anorexia nervosa, two conditions in which reward processing alterations have been documented. The findings are discussed in light of the current literature on reward processing and social motivation in particular.