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Authors

Raju, Mira

Lucas-Griffin, Sawyer

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Care Beyond Empathy: Towards a More Accessible Theory of Prosocial Clinician-Patient Interaction

Mira Raju

National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, Maryland, United States

Sawyer Lucas-Griffin

National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, Maryland, United States

Abstract

Empathy is a widely used and poorly understood concept, in spite of the significant intellectual thought that has been devoted to elucidating its meaning. Rather than focusing on the semantics of empathy, we explore its telos and utility—particularly in clinical care—through analyses of the “double empathy problem” and Theory of Mind, along with thought experiments drawn from healthcare scenarios. We find that although cognitive and affective empathy are often considered essential components of treating others with care and respect, they are neither sufficient nor clearly necessary for achieving these aims in clinical contexts. In fact, both varieties of empathy can easily lead to detrimental social outcomes. With this in mind, we suggest de-emphasizing the role of empathy in clinical culture. A clearer focus on actionable strategies and behaviors which facilitate positive patient-clinician interactions may help demystify “soft skills,” thus making competence in social aspects of healthcare more accessible to all.