



Mentalising Homeostasis: The Social Origins of Interoception and Emotion

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Abstract: The question of whether our mental life is initially and primarily shaped by embodied dimensions of the individual or by interpersonal relations is debated in many fields, including psychology, philosophy, psychoanalysis, and more recently, cognitive neuroscience. In this interdisciplinary talk, I will defend the claim that even some of the most minimal aspects of selfhood, namely the feeling qualities associated with being an embodied subject, are fundamentally shaped by embodied interactions with other people in early infancy and beyond. Such embodied interactions allow the developing organism to ‘mentalize’ its homeostatic regulation. In other words, embodied interactions contribute directly to the building of mental models (inferences) of the infant’s physiological states, given the need to maintain such states within a given dynamic range despite internal or external perturbations. Specifically, this position rests on the following three propositions: (1) The progressive integration and organisation of sensory and motor signals constitutes the foundations of the minimal self, a process which we have linked to contemporary, computational models of brain function and named ‘embodied mentalization’; (2) This mentalisation processes includes signals from other bodies in physical proximity and interaction, especially the bodies of caregivers. (3) Crucially, given the dependency of humans in early infancy, there is a ‘homeostatically-necessary’ plethora of such embodied ‘proximal’ interactions, so that interoceptive inferences and emotions necessarily rely on other people’s actions. Collectively, such experiences of proximal intercorporeality ‘sculpt’ the mentalization process and hence the constitution of the minimal self, including the progressive sophistication of mental distinctions between ‘subject-object’, ‘self-other’ and even ‘pleasure-pain’.

Bio: Aikaterini (Katerina) Fotopoulou, PhD, is a Reader in Psychodynamic Neuroscience at the Psychology and Language Sciences Division, University College London. Funded by a Starting Investigator Grant from the European Research Council for the project ‘Bodily Self’, she runs KatLab, a group of researchers and students that conduct studies on topics and disorders that lie at the borders between neurology and psychology. See here for projects and publications (www.fotopoulou.com). Katerina is the founder of the International Association for the Study of Affective Touch (IASAT) and the editor of the volume: Fotopoulou, A., Conway, M.A., Pfaff, D. From the Couch to the Lab: Trends in Psychodynamic Neuroscience. Oxford University Press, 2012. In 2016, Katerina was awarded the prestigious Early Career Award of the International Neuropsychology Society.

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