Automatic perspective-taking and the self-other relationship in pain empathy

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Empathy is the ability to understand another’s feelings, and is rooted in the overlap between self and other. Perspective-taking, the ability to imagine how it is like in the place of another person, underlies the workings of empathy. Researchers who study perspective-taking have done so assuming perspective-taking to be a conscious activity. When an individual does encounter someone in pain, it is nonetheless more likely that his or her response is automatic and dependent on unconscious processes. Automatic perspective-taking in one’s judgment of another’s pain in turn provides self/other information that could affect the mechanisms of pain processing. The present study sought to clarify the mechanisms relating to a differentiation of self and other in pain empathy. The effects of automatic perspective-taking on pain judgment were explored using images of hands and feet with or without the possibility of injury and in either a self or other-perspective. In experiment-1, participants rated the images for how much pain they felt the person depicted would feel. Ratings and reaction times were analyzed to reveal a significant main effect of perspective for reaction time only. In experiment-2, participants were first primed with the same images by presenting a mask for 120 ms followed by the images for 12 ms. Participants then had to rapidly categorize a word as either pain or non-pain-related. Analysis of the reaction time data revealed a marginally significant interaction between perspective and word valence, no main effect of perspective. Findings suggest that the automatic self-perspective marginally facilitates pain processing, while the use of automatic perspective-taking as self/other information provides marginal support for the threat value of pain hypothesis that when an individual perceives pain in another, a threat-detection system is activated leading to an aversive response.

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Biography
Teen Li Tan has had teaching, research and care experiences in hospital and school settings in both rural and urban Southeast Asia. She is keen on exploring projects that improve people’s well-being and alleviate suffering. She is currently a Graduate Research Assistant with the National University of Singapore.

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