

The effects of verbal suggestion on body perception

ABSTRACT:

Background

Words are powerful. Direct verbal suggestion - forthright verbal statements which can produce the experience of involuntary movement or cognitive changes in everyday and hypnotic contexts - can manipulate the meaning and significance of objects, events, perceptions and behaviour in ourselves and others.

Aims

To assess the effects of direct verbal suggestion on body representations and somatosensory cortical processing in the brain.

Method

A series of behavioral experiments incorporated verbal suggestion with tasks including administration of tactile stimuli to the back of the hand, either laterally or longitudinally; a 'tickle machine' which delivered tickle and itch stimulation to the palm of the hand, or an arm lowering task (adapted from the Harvard Group Scale of Hypnotic Suggestibility).

Results

Together, results show that verbal suggestion procedures without a conditioning stimulus, can affect both implicit and explicit body representations. Verbal suggestion influences laterality of sensory effects i.e., makes one limb more sensitive to touch relative to the other. Stimulation habituated over time. Verbal suggestion moderated the extent to which sensory effects decreased over time.

Conclusions

Natural language, particularly the use of direct verbal suggestion in everyday and hypnotic contexts, can manipulate the meaning and significance of our behaviour. Language can augment bodily sensations e.g., feelings of heaviness or lightness in a limb. Direct verbal suggestion is powerful and can edit our bodily reality. A better understanding of the characteristics of the applications of suggestions in everyday life can help us to better understand our somatosensory reality and how it can be edited.

Keywords

Tactile, Somatosensory, Natural language, Suggested reality, Upper limb

Published Work:

Walsh, E., & Oakley, D. A. (2022). Editing reality in the brain. *Neuroscience of Consciousness*, 2022(1), niac009. doi: 10.1093/nc/niac009

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