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Perception of Our Heartbeat Influences Our Body Image

A new study, led by Dr Manos Tsakiris from Royal Holloway, University of London, suggests that the way we experience the internal state of our body may also influence how we perceive our body from the outside, as for example in the mirror.

The research appears in the Proceedings of the Royal Society B.

Psychologists measured how good people are at feeling their body from within by asking them to count their heartbeats over a few minutes. They then measured how good people are at perceiving their own body-image from the outside by using a procedure that tricks them into feeling that a fake, rubber hand is their own hand.

Looking at a rubber hand being touched at the same time as one's own unseen hand creates the illusion that the rubber hand is part of one's body. The less accurate people were in monitoring their heartbeat, the more they were influenced by the illusion. The study shows for first time that there may be a strong link between how we experience our body from within and how we perceive it from the outside.

Dr Manos Tsakiris from the Department of Psychology at Royal Holloway says: "We perceive our own bodies in many

different ways. We can look at our bodies, feel touch on our bodies, and also feel our body from within, such as when we experience our hearts racing or butterflies in our stomachs. It seems that a stable perception of the body from the outside, what is known as "body image," is partly based on our ability to accurately perceive our body from within, such as our heartbeat."

The study, which was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, UK, is important as it may shed new light into pathologies of body-perception; exploring how certain people feel about or perceive the internal states of their body may help us understand why they perceive their body-image in distorted ways such as those who suffer from anorexia or body dysmorphia.

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