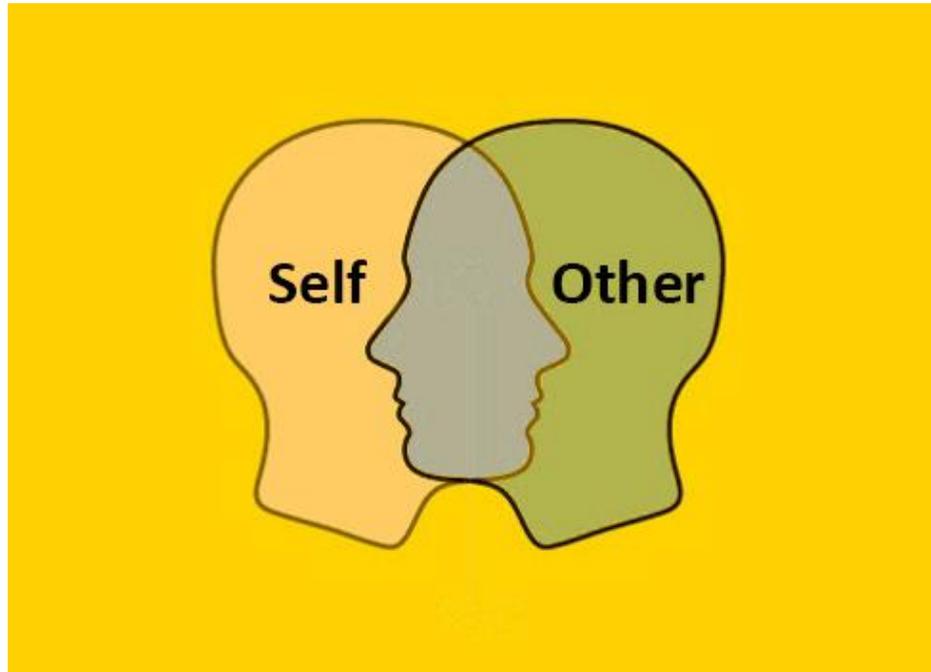


On the Merging of Minds:

A Referential Coding Account of Self-Other Integration and Distinction in Health and Schizophrenia



In my NCU seed money proposal I focused on self-other integration versus distinction in social interaction, bridging NCU's three main neuroscientific themes, i.e., perception and cognitive neuroscience (e.g., referential coding), social and affective neuroscience (e.g., the influence of social context), and clinical neuroscience (by comparing schizophrenia patients and healthy controls).

Specifically, to ensure fluent and efficient social interaction people have to coordinate and *integrate*, their own thoughts, emotions, and intentions with those of others. Equally important is the ability to *distinguish* self from other. After all, if one would confuse self and other, it becomes difficult to develop a personal identity, regulate one's behavior, or understand the intentions and emotions of others without projecting one's own intentions and emotions onto them. Hence, the first aim was to unravel how people integrate versus distinguish self and other in social interaction.

A second aim was to shed light on the (dys)function of self-other integration and distinction in schizophrenia. Schizophrenia patients typically integrate too much, and distinguish too little the intentions and emotions of self and other¹⁻⁴. As a consequence, some patients have difficulty distinguishing their own voice from those of others, causing them to 'hear voices' they actually (sub vocally) produce themselves⁵⁻⁷. Also, patients get more easily distressed when confronted with the distress of others^{8,9} (i.e., emotion contagion). These impairments in self-other distinction lie at the core of schizophrenia^{4,5} and provide a naturalistic framework for examining the mechanisms involved in self-other distinction in relation to social functioning. In return, increased insight into these mechanisms may serve to reduce schizophrenia symptoms and improve patients' quality of life¹⁰.

The NCU seed money grant gave me the opportunity to develop and elaborate my own research ideas with the aim of attaining further funding. This has resulted in another successful seed money application (EASP), which then enabled me to perform a number of successful pilot studies, pay several international visits to extend my network, present at international conferences, and write a veni proposal which is now under review.