

# Neural representation of self-concept in sighted and congenitally blind adults

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The functional organization of human primary visual and auditory cortices is influenced by sensory experience and exhibits cross-modal plasticity in the absence of input from one modality. However, it remains debated whether the functional architecture of the prefrontal cortex, when engaged in social cognitive processes, is shaped by sensory experience. The present study investigated whether activity in the medial prefrontal cortex underlying self-reflective thinking of one's own traits is modality-specific and whether it undergoes cross-modal plasticity in the absence of visual input. We scanned 47 sighted participants and 21 congenitally blind individuals using functional magnetic resonance imaging during trait judgements of the self and a familiar other. Sighted participants showed medial prefrontal activation and enhanced functional connectivity between the medial prefrontal and visual cortices during self-judgements compared to other-judgements on visually but not aurally presented trait words, indicating that medial prefrontal activity underlying self-representation is visual modality-specific in sighted people. In contrast, blind individuals showed medial prefrontal activation and enhanced functional connectivity between the medial prefrontal and occipital cortices during self-judgements relative to other-judgements on aurally presented stimuli, suggesting that visual deprivation leads to functional reorganization of the medial prefrontal cortex so as to be tuned by auditory inputs during self-referential processing. The medial prefrontal activity predicted memory performances on trait words used for self-judgements in both subject groups, implicating a similar functional role of the medial prefrontal cortex in self-referential processing in sighted and blind individuals. Together, our findings indicate that self-representation in the medial prefrontal cortex is strongly shaped by sensory experience.

**Keywords:** self-representation; cross-modal plasticity; medial prefrontal cortex; functional connectivity; congenitally blind  
**Abbreviation:** BA = Brodmann area; MRI = magnetic resonance imaging

## Introduction

The functional organization of human primary visual and auditory cortices is influenced by sensory experience and exhibits cross-modal plasticity in the absence of input from one modality. However, it remains debated whether the functional architecture of the prefrontal cortex, when engaged in social cognitive processes, is shaped by sensory experience. The present study investigated whether activity in the medial prefrontal cortex underlying self-reflective thinking of one's own traits is modality-specific and whether it undergoes cross-modal plasticity in the absence of visual input. We scanned 47 sighted participants and 21 congenitally blind individuals using functional magnetic resonance imaging during trait judgements of the self and a familiar other. Sighted participants showed medial prefrontal activation and enhanced functional connectivity between the medial prefrontal and visual cortices during self-judgements compared to other-judgements on visually but not aurally presented trait words, indicating that medial prefrontal activity underlying self-representation is visual modality-specific in sighted people. In contrast, blind individuals showed medial prefrontal activation and enhanced functional connectivity between the medial prefrontal and occipital cortices during self-judgements relative to other-judgements on aurally presented stimuli, suggesting that visual deprivation leads to functional reorganization of the medial prefrontal cortex so as to be tuned by auditory inputs during self-referential processing. The medial prefrontal activity predicted memory performances on trait words used for self-judgements in both subject groups, implicating a similar functional role of the medial prefrontal cortex in self-referential processing in sighted and blind individuals. Together, our findings indicate that self-representation in the medial prefrontal cortex is strongly shaped by sensory experience.

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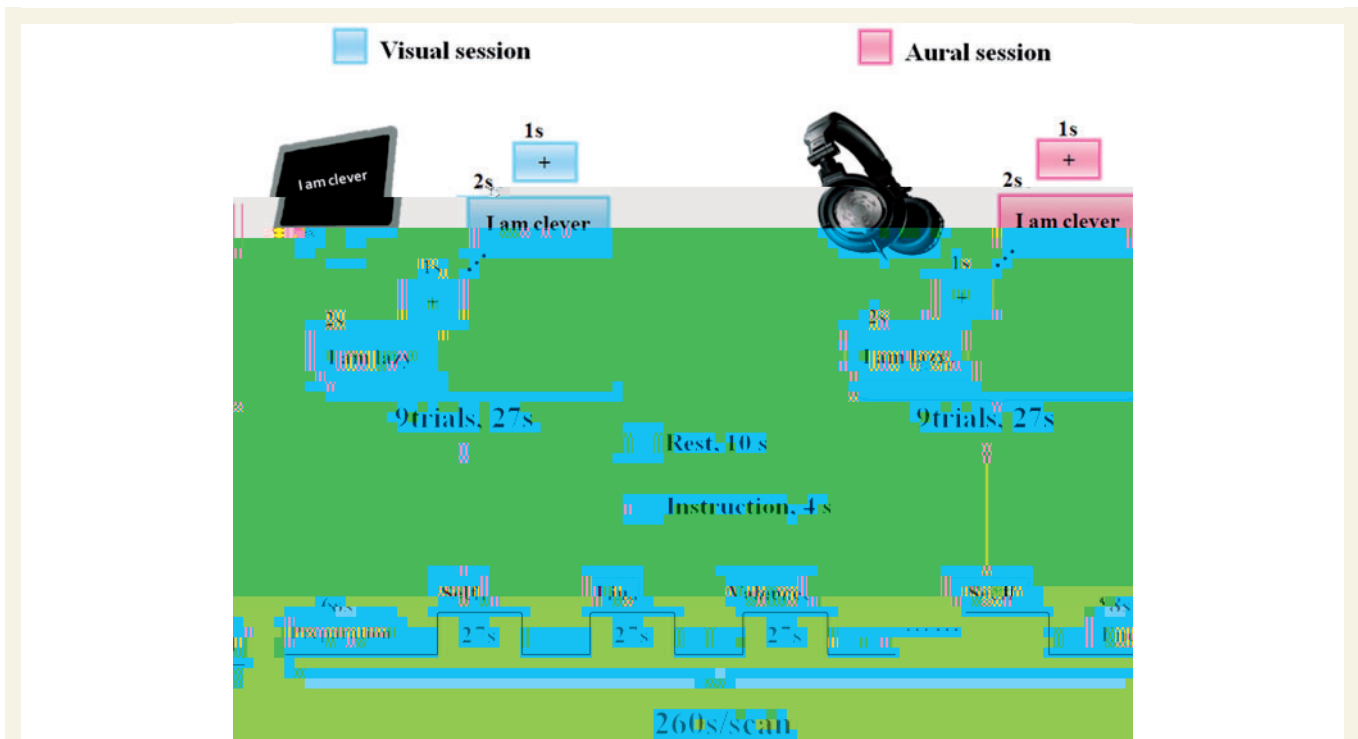
a. c a d ca a (G et al., 2005) a d  
 ba- (A d et al., 2003). S a , a d -  
 a c - a a d c -  
 b ac - (a et al., 1998) a d  
 a a (N a et al., 1999) a a . T d  
 dca a b a a a c  
 - a c ada a ,  
 a d ac - a .  
 H , b a a d c a a -  
 a c ca c d ca c  
 a a d b a c . T a ac -  
 a c d b a a d a d a a  
 dca c ca (Ka et al., 2003).  
 T c c d  
 b d - a ac a d  
 a ac (R a a d S a a, 2010), ac a d b  
 d d d b ac b d a d c a b d  
 d d a (Rcca d et al., 2009). T a a c  
 a ad a d a -  
 d b c a a  
 a b d a c a a (e d et al., 2009).  
 T , a a a b a a c a c  
 a a da a d  
 a a . A a a  
 c ca a ab a a a a  
 - a a a d a d  
 - a a d a d c a b d ad  
 (e d et al., 2009).  
 l c a da c c a  
 ac d c a d . S a a  
 ca a a a d a d  
 d ca d a d d  
 a (B a a et al., 1999). M a a ac a  
 d a c (Ca d a a d e , 2006), c  
 a d a a (S a  
 et al., 2008). T a b a c  
 a c a d a d c a  
 da - c c a d a d b -  
 . a a d b a -  
 a ac c d - a b c a a d  
 a d - a ac c  
 T c . add d b a a  
 ac da a c a d - c -  
 a (N a d e , 2004) da - c c a d  
 a d b . W d a a  
 a . a a d a d (R  
 et al., 1977), a d ca c d d b a a d a d  
 da . l a a da a ac  
 c a a d c a d a d -  
 (a et al., 2002; a et al., 2004;  
 M c et al., 2006; Z et al., 2007) a d ca -  
 d c a d a c a  
 d (Mac et al., 2004; M a et al., 2006),  
 a da a c -  
 a . H , d d a d  
 da a ac a d - a d

a c ac a da - c c, a d  
 , a a ad a a da  
 a c c a d a d da  
 d a a . T d ,  
 ba a d a da a a d  
 a . (J et al., 2002). T d d ca d ac a -  
 c a - d a a d  
 d da a c , c a a ca d  
 d a a a d . H ,  
 dd c a - d  
 - d a a a  
 da a c a a  
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 Acc d a -c c d a  
 ab ac b c . d (e d a d S . , 1997;  
 K et al., 2003), a ac -c  
 a d a a b a a  
 H a a -c a  
 a d a d a d  
 (Gb , 1979; B , 1992) a d a d -  
 a a da  
 , c a a c a ac a d  
 b d a (B d . a d C , 1998; a et al.,  
 2007). l c -c a ba  
 a a a a da  
 a ac a d -c a a d  
 - da . l add , da a ac  
 a d a b a d da  
 b d d da a d , a a a ,  
 d a d c a d a d  
 - a a a c c -c .  
 T , E 1 ca d d a c -  
 a c a MRI d a a d  
 a a d a ab a , a a a  
 a , a d d a . S a  
 (a et al., 2002; a et al., 2004; M c et al.,  
 2006; Z et al., 2007), c a - d -c  
 - d a d a ac -c  
 a a d c a - d  
 a - d a ac a ca d  
 a . d (F . 1). A E  
 1 d a da a ac a a ca d  
 a a c c a da , E  
 2 ca d c a b d d da a d d  
 c d , - a d a d a a  
 c d a ac a ad  
 c a a a da a c a  
 d a d d a a

## Materials and methods

### Subjects

T - d a c a c d E 1.  
 T d a c a c d - da a a d



**Figure 1** E → a → a d → d E → 1. A b c → a → d. B → c → a → c →  
 → d → a → a d → c → a → a → c → d → a → a d → d b a 4 → c →  
 a d → d b a 10 → a → c → T → a a d a → → - a d → d → d → d → a →  
 a d → → . Eac ca → a → d 260 .

→ ad → . T → a → 23 → d d d a (11  
 → , 12 → a ; a → a → : 18 28 → a → a → =22.0 → a )  
 → c → d → c → a MRI da a a a . O → b → c → a  
 → a → d, → a → d. A → d → a → c → a →  
 → d → ca → c → a → c → d a → d → ad  
 → a → c → c → d → - → a →  
 T → c → c → a → b → d → d → a → a → d 22 → d → c →  
 a → c → a → c → c → d → E → 2. T → b → d → a → d →  
 → d → c → a → c → a → c → d → da a a a → d →  
 → ad → . Da a → → a → 19 → c → a →  
 b → d → a → c → a (11 → a , 8 → a ; a → a → : 18 28 → a → a →  
 → =25.2 → a ) a → d 19 → d → c → a → c → a (9 → a , 10 →  
 → a ; a → a → : 19 28 → a → a → =23.2 → a ) → c → d →  
 → c → a MRI da a a a . O → b → d → a → c → a → - a → d → a → d  
 → a → d. A → a → c → a → ad  
 → ca → c → a → c → d a → d → ad  
 → a → a → (n=7), ca a ac (n=5), → a → a → b →  
 → a a (n=1), → c → a → a → (n=2), a → (n=1),  
 → c → a → a (n=1) a → d → c → a → a → c → a (n=2). I → d → c →  
 → , a → d → b → a → c → c → c → , a → d →  
 d . I → d → c → a → b → a → d → b → a → b → d → a → c → a .

**Stimuli and procedure**

I E → 1, → d d → ca → d → c → d  
 → C → d →  
 a → d → c → a → d → a → c → a → a → c →  
 → c → a → d → a → a → d → d → ad → c →  
 a → a → c → a → c → a → b → a → c → ad →

(22.05 . H , 16b → a → a → , G → d → W → P → c ) . V → a → -  
 → c → d → a → bac . bac -  
 → d → a → d → c → d → ad → b → a  
 → . Eac → c → d → a → ab → , a  
 → - a → c → d → C → a → (X → a → L → c → a → d  
 X → a → L → c → ) , → a → a → d → T → a →  
 → ca → c → . S → c → a → d → a → /  
 → - d → , 'I → a → b → a → ) , → d → , 'L  
 X → a → a → ' a → d → d → , → a → a →  
 → d ' ) b → b →  
 → d → . P → ca → , a → c → a →  
 → ac → a → a → a → a → .  
 Eac → d → a → d → a → , a  
 b → c → . I → ac → ca → ac → b → c → d → c → a → ca  
 → ( . a → d → / a → - d → , a → d → / a  
 → - d → a → d → d → / a → a → d → ) . D →  
 → ac → ca → d → a → a → d → a → a → d →  
 → , 54 → ( → a → )  
 → ac → c → d → . A 6 → 'T → ab  
 a → a → c → a → a → d → ac → ca → . Eac →  
 31 → a → d → a → 4 → c → ( → c → d →  
 → a → a → d → ad → a → d → ) ,  
 → d → b → a → . Eac → a → c → d → a → 2 → a → d →  
 b → a → 1 → a → a → . T → d → a → d → b →  
 → 10 → d → c → a → c → a → d → a → a →  
 bac → .  
 A → a → 444 → a → ac → c → d → ab → d  
 → a → a → ad → c → (L , 1990) , ac → c → c → d

C c a a c . Ha d a c c ,  
 a d a a a . T d a d -  
 a c c a c a d 324 d -  
 a c a c a d a d a d  
 54 d . T a a c c d a  
 c b a a d a c c . T d a d  
 c a a d a d a a  
 d . E a c C c a a c c a c  
 a d a a a 0.34° × 0.45° ( d × )  
 a a d a 80c .  
 A c a d , a c a a a d  
 a d c . S c d  
 60 d a d (20 a d a c d a .) a d  
 c a a a a d 60 a d . T d  
 a a d a d a c b a a d a c  
 c . E a c d a d d d a 2 a d a c a  
 d c a d d d a d b a b  
 T a d d E 2 a  
 d E 1, a a d  
 c d . P a c a d c a , a c  
 c d a c c a . S d a c a a d a  
 a c b c . a d c a d .  
 A c a d , b b d a c a a d d c -  
 a d a a d a d .

## Imaging procedure

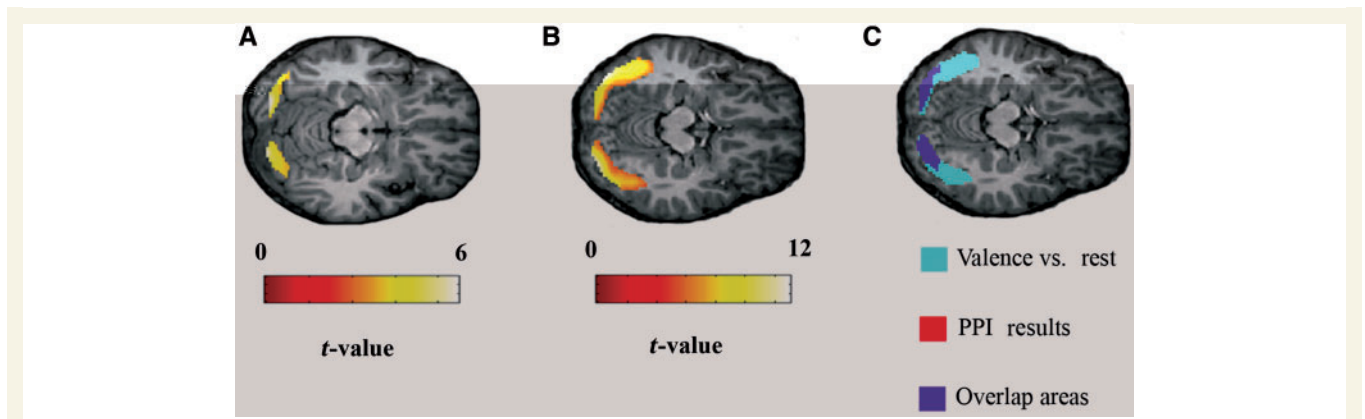
A GE 3 T c a a a d a d a d c a d a c b d  
 (BOLD) a c - a a a  
 (64 × 64 × 32 a 3.75 × 3.75 × 4. 3 a a ,  
 =2000 c =30 , a =90°, d  
 =24 × 24c ) c a d  
 a . A T<sub>1</sub> d c a a (256 × 256 ×  
 128 a a a 0.938 × 0.938 × 1.4 3,  
 =7.4 c =3 , =450 ,  
 a =20°) a b a c d .

## Imaging analysis

SPM2 ( V c T a , L d , UK)  
 a d a a a . T c a a c c d  
 a d . S a a ( a a ; x, y, z a d  
 a ; c , , a ) c d a c a . T  
 a a c a a c d a a a d a  
 a d a d a d a d a d T<sub>1</sub> M a c a  
 I (MNI) a . T a a a d  
 c a a , c a a d 2 c  
 a d a a d a c G a a  
 8 - d a a . T a d a a d  
 a b -c a c . S a c a a a SPM2 d a a c c a  
 a d c c . I a c b c ,  
 a d d a a c d  
 a a L a M a c c d c d . A  
 c d (a d / a - d , a d / a -  
 d , a d / a a d a d )  
 c d . A b -c a c a d c  
 c a c a d a c a c c d . T  
 a a c d a a a a c c  
 a d a a d c .  
 A a a a c d d E 1  
 a a d a a c

a a d a a d  
 d a c a . T d a a c a a d  
 a priori c a d a a a d  
 5 - d a M N I c d a 8, 56, 9 [B d a a a (BA) 10]  
 b a d a a d a a a c a d -  
 a d - d C a c a (Z et al., 2007).  
 T a a a a c a d -  
 d a c a c a d d a c a  
 a d d a a d a a a a (ANOVA)  
 M d a ( a a d ) a d J d - d -  
 d - d - d - d -  
 d ) a - b c a a .  
 R a d c a a a c d d b a d a c a  
 a a - a - a c d d a a c a a a  
 C a a d - d a d  
 a a d a d a c a d . I  
 b a a d a d - a d  
 - d a c d , b a a c a  
 a a c a a a c a c a d c -  
 a c M d a ( a a d ) × J d  
 - d - d - d - d - b c a c a c a  
 1 - 1 - 1 1 ( a - d , a - d , a d  
 - d a d d - d ) . S a ,  
 b a a d a - a d a - d a c  
 d - d a , a c M d a ( a  
 a d ) × J d ( - d - d - d )  
 a c - d b c a c a 1 - 1 - 1 1 ( a  
 - d - d , a a - d - d , a d - d )  
 a d a d a d ) . A c a  
 a d c a a d a c d  
 a P < 0.05 ( c c d - c a ) .  
 A c c a a c a a (F et al., 1997) a  
 d a b a a d c a  
 a d c a a ( . a d c a c c )  
 - d a a a c a d - d c a d  
 - d . T c d a a c -  
 a - d - d a a a d -  
 a . d d a d . T a c  
 d d a c a d a a 5 - - a d  
 a a . d a a c T  
 a c a a d , a d c -  
 c a a c a c a d a - b  
 d c a - c c d a c a d a  
 c c d d a a c - d  
 - d . T c c a a c  
 c d a c c a a a - d  
 - d ) a d a c a c d a  
 a c . T d d a c a a c c  
 c c a a c b d a a  
 c a d b a a a b d  
 - a T . T a a d b a  
 c a c a c a d c -





**Figure 3**

(A)  $t$ -value map (x, y, z: 22, -88, -16, BA 18, Z = 3.77, F = 3.60,  $P < 0.001$ ,  $F = 3.00$ ). (B)  $t$ -value map (x, y, z: 38, -82, -12, BA 17, 18, Z = 6.28, F = 6.39,  $P < 0.001$ ,  $F = 3.00$ ). (C)  $t$ -value map (x, y, z: 8, 56, 10, BA 10, 32, Z = 3.61, F = 2.20). (D)  $t$ -value map (x, y, z: 8, 56, 12, BA 10, 32, Z = 3.53, F = 2.50). (E)  $t$ -value map (x, y, z: 4, 58, 16, BA 9, 10, Z = 5.57, F = 5.13). (F)  $t$ -value map (x, y, z: 4, -52, 28, BA 23, 31, Z = 5.30, F = 5.13). (G)  $t$ -value map (x, y, z: 52, 2, -18, BA 22, Z = 5.13, F = 5.13). (H)  $t$ -value map (x, y, z: -44, -8, 2, BA 42, Z = 5.34, F = 5.13). (I)  $t$ -value map (x, y, z: 2, 56, 18, BA 9, 10, Z = 5.24, F = 5.13). (J)  $t$ -value map (x, y, z: 6, -48, 32, BA 23, 31, Z = 5.61, F = 5.13).



E<sub>1</sub> (x, y, z: 8, 56, 12). T ANOVA  
 J d ( ) a a - b c  
 a a d G (b d a c a ) a  
 a - c a a d a ca ac  
 J d a d G [F(1,36) = 4.972, P=0.032,  
 F . 4B], a da a ac a a  
 - d a - d b d d d a  
 [F(1,18)=15.657, P=0.001] b  
 [F(1,18)=0.071, P=0.793]. T ANOVA J d  
 ( - d ) a d G (b d  
 d c ), , a d a ca  
 ac J d a d G [F(1,36)=1.350,  
 P=0.253, F . 4B]. T dca a da a  
 c a a d a a a b d  
 a c a b d c a da  
 a ac a d a a  
 - d d d d a c . A  
 -ba a ca a a c a a a a c -  
 d d c - da ac  
 a b d a c a . T c a  
 - d - d a d ca  
 ac a a da a c a da  
 c a c (x, y, z: 6, 50, 12, BA 10, Z=4.06, P<0.05,  
 c c d - c a , F . 4C a d 4D) b d a -  
 c a . H , ca ac a a b d  
 d c a a - d P<0.001 a d  
 a d d 50 . T a c a  
 b d d d a a d d c a d S a  
 Tab 3 a d 4, c .  
 G d E<sub>1</sub>, d a  
 - d a a d a b d d d -  
 a a c a c c da  
 a c a d c . T a d b  
 c d c a c ca ac a a a c -  
 a d - d a d - d . V d a

- d ca d a d c a c c  
 da a c a d b a a cc a c (x, y, z:  
 18, -80, -18 a d -28, -78, 34, BA 18, Z=3.22 a d 3.39;  
 a - d P<0.001 a d a d  
 100 , F . 4E). F 4E a a b a  
 a a a ac a d b a d - a d a  
 d a d c a c c da  
 a c d - d b d a c a .  
 T a a a a a a d  
 a a a a d b d a c a a d  
 d c , cac a d c a - d  
 a - d . T a d ca ac a  
 d a da a c (x, y, z: -4, 54, 20, BA 10,  
 Z=5.46) a d c a c / c (x, y, z: -6,  
 -58, 24, BA 23, 31, Z=5.96, S a F . 2A) b d  
 d d a . A a a c c a b d d c -  
 [ da a c (x, y, z: -6,



a d , c a d c a  
 da a ac a d  
 a . d a d c c a  
 d d - d b d a d b d a c -  
 a . T a d a ca d ( a  
 :  $r=0.170$ ,  $P=0.438$ ; a a :  $r=-0.061$ ,  $P=0.789$ )  
 b d a c a ( $r=-0.152$ ,  $P=0.533$ ), a  
 - d a a c ' c c d - a d  
 a d a c c a a a a a

## Discussion

O c a MRI a da  
 a ac -c a c c  
 a da d d a a d b  
 c - da a c ab a c -  
 a b d d d a . O d d a c a  
 - a a d a d - ca  
 ( et al., 2002; a  
 et al., 2004; M c et al., 2006; Z et al., 2007),  
 a - d ac a a da  
 a c a a d . S d  
 a da a ac a ca d a  
 a a d d d a  
 d a a , dca a da a ac  
 d -c a d d d a  
 a da -c c . C d ,  
 - d d d a d c a c c  
 da a c a d a c a  
 - d a a d c c -c a c -  
 a d a d - a c a da  
 a c a d a c d a a -  
 a d . H c d a  
 a c d c c d c da ' a c -  
 a ' b - a c (M a d C , 2001).  
 H , d d c b a  
 a c c d d c - a  
 c a a c a c d c ca  
 a a - da c  
 l e d , a d c - a d a  
 e a a c d c c d  
 c a c a c a d a c a c -  
 d - a a a d a d c (H a a et al.,  
 2008). T c a c c da  
 a c a d cc a c b d  
 - da d b d c c a c c  
 b a a a .  
 l c - a a c a  
 da -c c a cc a c a a  
 c d a a a d  
 a c a d a a . S c -  
 da c c a b d a a d a a a  
 c a a a ca a a a d a d -  
 c d c b b a a a (B a a et al.,  
 1999). O d a c a

c a d , b d b da  
 a c , d a a a  
 - da -c c d .  
 l add , c a MRI a  
 c - da a c da a ac  
 a . W d a da a  
 c ac a a a  
 d - d a d a b a -  
 a d - c a b d d d a  
 - d - d . T a c a a -  
 a cc a c b a a b d  
 c a d (B et al., 2002; G et al.,  
 2009). l da a c c - da  
 a a , c ca ac a a  
 c - d a d c a c c da  
 a c a d cc a c d - d  
 b d d d a . l da a ac  
 a d - d b d b b d a d d  
 a ab d c d d a d -  
 - a a d d d - d , dca  
 a da a c a da a c a  
 ab a a d - a a d a d - da -  
 da d b d d d a c . W a  
 a c c a a a d a  
 a a d (F et al., 2001; N - a et al.,  
 1999; B et al., 2002; G et al., 2009), d  
 - b d d d a dca a a a ad  
 c a a a da a c a  
 d b a d d a a . T  
 a c a a d a a da -  
 a c c -c a a d  
 a d , b a  
 l da a a c - da a c  
 c c a da a c d  
 a . T ac d a da  
 a c a ca  
 a . d a b d a a d  
 a d - da d a d - da  
 b d a c a . S a , a a  
 a b a d a d ' a  
 a da -c c a d ca d -  
 a (K a et al., 2003; d et al., 2009;  
 R c c a d et al., 2009). T d a c a c  
 a d a a  
 a c a c a c  
 M - a d , a d  
 ac a d c a c a d c , c  
 a a ca d a - a d c  
 (C a a a a d T , 2006). T c  
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## Supplementary material

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