Putting the ‘I’ and the ‘Me’ in emotion regulation: Reply to Northoff

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Northoff’s comment [1] raises important questions about the role of the self in emotion regulation. Space constraints precluded our addressing these questions in our original article [2]. We are therefore delighted to have the chance to consider them here.

More than a century ago, William James [3] distinguished between two aspects of the psychological self: the ‘I’ and the ‘Me’. James's ‘I’ is the first-person agentic ‘doer’ that in the context of emotion regulation inhibits prepotent responses, generates reappraisals, and so on. Because the ‘I’ aspect of self accompanies all goal-directed activities, it is involved in all forms of self-regulation, not just those involving the cognitive control of emotion. Research has just begun to examine the neural bases of this aspect of self, but we believe that, depending upon the task and context, different combinations of neural systems (including, for example, dorsolateral prefrontal cortex and anterior cingulate cortex) may be involved in the agentic, ‘I’ mode of regulatory control over emotion and other processes.

By contrast, James’s ‘Me’ is the third-person object of self-reflection about one’s traits (‘am I friendly?’), beliefs (‘do I like chocolate?’), states (‘am I angry?’) and so on. The ‘Me’ can participate in emotion regulation in numerous ways, including self-monitoring of one’s changing emotional states and the personal relevance of events. We believe that medial prefrontal cortex (MPFC) plays a special role in the ‘Me’ mode of self reflection [4–6]. For example, as Northoff notes (and as was noted in the legend to Figure 3c of our original article, but not elaborated upon because of space limitations), we have found MPFC activity to be associated with attempts to decrease the personal relevance of emotional stimuli by becoming a detached observer [6]. Elsewhere [4,6] we have argued that dorsal MPFC may be important for tracking changes in emotional state and perceived self relevance of stimuli during reappraisal and other forms of emotion regulation. It is also possible that dorsal and ventral MPFC perform distinct but related functions during self-reflective, self-regulatory, social-cognitive and affective processing, as suggested by our work on the appraisal of emotions and traits in self and others [5,7] and similar work by several other groups [8–10].

In summary, we agree with Northoff that MPFC probably plays a role in both self reflection and emotion regulation. The challenge for future research is to characterize more fully the rich interplay between James’s ‘I’- and ‘Me’-related psychological processes and underlying neural systems in the context of self-regulation.

References

3 James, W. (1890) The Principles of Psychology, Henry Holt
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7 Ochsner, K.N. et al. (in press) The neural correlates of direct and reflected self-knowledge. Neuroimage