Parkinson’s disease, art making, and aesthetic perception

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Psychologicum, Liebiggasse 5, 1010 Vienna

Parkinson’s disease (PD) is a progressing neurodegenerative disease with hallmark clinical features of motor disorders. The initial symptoms are predominantly the result of loss of dopaminergic neurons in the midbrain. As the disease progresses, the degeneration of additional brain areas can also cause various non-motor symptoms, including cognitive, motivational, emotional and social impairments. At the same time, and despite the disease’s otherwise devastating severity, PD is also connected—often anecdotally, and in a small subset of patients—with a sudden burst of artistic creativity, motivation, or even quality of produced art. This can occur in both established artists—such as Salvador Dali—and, interestingly, in individuals who had not shown previous interest or aptitude for art. This also occurs despite the fact that many essential motor and visuo-spatial abilities often thought to connect to making art, are impaired in PD, raising key questions both about the unique neurophysiological basis for art making and aesthetic perception, and regarding the brain’s function and plasticity. In this talk, I will review the literature on art making with PD, arguing that the creative awakening is most often suggested to be a side effect of antiParkinsonian therapy, especially dopamine replacement drugs and dopamine agonists, which may create a unique increase in brain activity in presently undamaged regions connected to dopamine pathways as well as to reward, inhibition and creativity. I also introduce recent studies conducted with PD patients in regards to art viewing, which has also not been considered in relation to PD. We investigate whether the liking and aesthetic judgment, as well as formal-perceptual and content-representational dimensions are affected by PD.