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Heartbeat Counting Accuracy Is Enhanced in Blind Individuals

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Blind individuals have superior abilities to perform perceptual tasks that rely on exteroceptive information, since visual deprivation is associated with heightened cross-modal plasticity. However, it is unknown whether neuroplasticity after visual loss also affects interoception, that is, the sensations arising from one's inner organs that convey information about the physiological state of the body. Herein, we examine the influence of blindness on cardiac interoception, which is an interoceptive submodality that has important links to emotional processing and bodily self-awareness. We tested 36 blind and 36 age- and sex-matched sighted volunteers and examined their cardiac interoceptive ability using the heartbeat counting task. The results showed that blind individuals had significantly higher accuracy in perceiving their heartbeat than did individuals in a matched sighted control group. In contrast, there were no significant differences between the groups in the metacognitive dimensions of cardiac interoception or the purely physiological measurement of heart rate, thereby underscoring that the improved accuracy likely reflects a superior perceptual sensitivity to cardiac interoceptive signals in blind individuals. We conclude that visual deprivation leads to an enhanced ability to count one's own heartbeats, which has important implications for the study of the extent of cross-modal plasticity after visual loss, understanding emotional processing in blind individuals, and learning how bodily self-awareness can develop and be sustained in the absence of visual experience.

Public Significance Statement

We found that blind individuals are better than sighted at counting their own heartbeats. This suggests that brain plasticity following blindness leads to superior ability in sensing signals from the heart, which has implications for the study of bodily awareness and emotional processing in blind individuals.

Keywords: blindness, cross-modal plasticity, heartbeat perception, interoception, metacognition

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Lack and loss of vision are associated with heightened cross-modal plasticity (see Frasnelli et al., 2011). Neuroplasticity, which occurs after sensory deprivation, can lead to enhancements within one or more senses to compensate for the lack of another sense (see Merabet & Pascual-Leone, 2010; Renier et al., 2014; Singh et al., 2018). In line with this, numerous studies have found that blind individuals show superior performance on perceptual tasks that involve processing exteroceptive information, that is, stimuli originating outside of the body. Within the auditory modality, blind individuals have been found to have enhanced abilities in

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spatial hearing both in near (Lessard et al., 1998; Röder et al., 1999) and far space (Battal et al., 2020; Voss et al. 2004), as well as superior pitch discrimination (Gougoux et al., 2004). In the case of the tactile modality, blind individuals have been shown to have enhanced tactile acuity (Goldreich & Kanics, 2006; Wan et al., 2010), as well as superior tactile symmetry perception (Bauer et al. 2015). Finally, in the olfactory modality, blind individuals have been found to have a lower odor detection threshold (Beaulieu-Lefebvre et al., 2011; Cuevas et al., 2010; but see also Sorokowska, 2016). All these sensory enhancements facilitate blind people's interactions with "the outside," that is, the external environment. However, interoception, that is, sensing oneself from "the inside," which is crucially important for maintaining bodily awareness and emotional processing, has not yet been investigated in blind individuals.

Interoception, in its classic definition, is the sense of the internal state of the body, which originates from the visceral organs (see Sherrington, 1948). Among the interoceptive submodalities, the heartbeat is one of the most studied signals (see Khalsa et al., 2018). Cardiac interoception is believed to play an important role in bodily awareness (Herbert & Pollatos, 2012) and emotional functioning (Critchley & Garfinkel, 2017). Alterations in this interoceptive submodality have been described in autism (Garfinkel et al., 2016) and schizophrenia (Ardizzi et al., 2016).

This experiment aims to investigate the potential influence of blindness on cardiac interoception. To quantify the ability to perceive heartbeats, we used the heartbeat counting task (Schandry, 1981). Furthermore, to gain a richer understanding of cardiac interoception both at the perceptual and metacognitive levels, the present article follows the dimensional model of interoception introduced by Garfinkel et al. (2015; see Suksasilp and Garfinkel [2022] for the revision of the model). This model distinguishes three major dimensions of interoception. The first is interoceptive accuracy, which is the behavioral performance on a test consisting of monitoring one's own physiological events. In this paper, this concept refers to the accuracy in the heartbeat counting task (Schandry, 1981), in which individuals count their heartbeats for a given amount of time. The second is interoceptive sensibility, which is the participant's assessment of their own interoceptive experiences as obtained by self-report. In this paper, this concept is defined as the result of the Multidimensional Assessment of Interoceptive Awareness (Mehling et al., 2012) questionnaire, which is a measure relating to a spectrum of internal bodily sensations. The third is interoceptive awareness, which is the degree to which interoceptive accuracy corresponds with confidence in task response. In this paper, this concept is defined as the correlation between heartbeat counting task performance and the confidence ratings obtained after every trial of the task. Additionally, to examine another dimension of participants' reflection on their abilities, we obtained the participants' beliefs about their performance both before and after completing the task. Some interoceptive dimensions have been found to correspond, and others to dissociate, with the dissociations being especially prevalent in clinical populations (e.g., Garfinkel et al., 2016; Jakubczyk et al., 2019; Palser et al., 2018, 2020; Rae et al., 2019). Therefore, investigating all the dimensions of interoception instead of one (e.g., accuracy only) is important for discussing the potential clinical implications of the study.

Given the existence of reports showing the involvement of somatosensory mechanoreceptors in cardioception (Knapp-Kline et al., 2021; Macefield, 2003), we also included a control task, namely, the grating orientation task, which is a well-established measure of tactile acuity (Johnson & Phillips, 1981). By including this task, we could assess to what extent the potential difference in the ability to detect heartbeats is specific to cardiac interoceptive accuracy itself and not due to the influence of superior tactile acuity of blind participants (e.g., Alary et al., 2009; Goldreich & Kanics, 2003).

Our study is, we believe, the first to look at the relationship between blindness and cardiac interoception, as well as visceral interoception in general. Our hypothesis was that cardiac interoception is enhanced in blind individuals and, thus, that blind individuals would perform better than sighted individuals in the heartbeat counting task. We did not have specific predictions regarding the remaining interoceptive dimensions, as these were included for exploratory purposes. The overarching goal of this study was to take the first step toward understanding how the absence of vision influences interoception, which could have important implications for advancing our understanding of the role of visual experience in bodily self-awareness and emotional processing.

Method

Participants

Thirty-six blind and 36 sighted individuals (age range: 22–45 years, mean age: 33.42 years in the blind group, 33.19 in the sighted group; 19 males and 17 females per group; 1 left-handed individual in the sighted group) participated in the study. Sample size has been determined based on previous behavioral studies with blind participants examining the interoceptive submodality of pain, as well as tactile acuity (Goldreich & Kanics, 2006; Slimani et al., 2014). This is a sample comparable to or larger than in previous behavioral studies with blind individuals (e.g., Bottini et al., 2015; Vercillo et al., 2018). The target number of blind participants has been reached within a pre-planned 1.5-months long research visit at Jagiellonian University. A sighted, sex- and age-matched participant was recruited for each blind participant. Both blind and sighted participants were invited to take part in the study through multiple recruitment channels to make the samples representative and to balance any potential bias one channel might introduce. All subjects reported that they had no additional sensory or motor disabilities. The exclusion criteria included having a history of neurological or psychiatric disorders.

For all blind participants, blindness was attributed to peripheral origin and was not associated with other sensory impairments. The inclusion criteria were complete blindness or minimal light sensitivity with no ability to functionally use this sensation, as well as no pattern vision. Thirty-one participants were congenitally blind, two early blind (early blindness is defined here as acquired in childhood, 0–2 years after birth, as in Gougoux et al., 2004; Sorokowska, 2016), and three late blind. Excluding the late blind or all non-congenitally blind participants from the analyses did not change any of the results presented in the paper. Handedness was assessed using the Edinburgh Handedness Inventory (Oldfield, 1971) in the sighted group, and with its modified version in the blind group (Argyropoulos et al., 2014). Blind participants' characteristics are presented in Table 1. We have no reason to believe that the results reported in this paper depend on other characteristics of the participants, materials, or context (see Simons et al., 2017).

The study was approved by the Jagiellonian University Ethics Committee. All participants provided written informed consent before the study and were compensated for their time; blind

Table 1
Blind Participants Characteristics

Participant	Age (years)	Sex	Cause of blindness	Age at blindness onset	Handedness	Reading hand (finger)	Age when learned Braille	Reading frequency
1	24	Male	Atrophy of the optic nerve	Congenitally blind	Right-handed	Left (index finger)	6	Every day
2	26	Male	Retinopathy of prematurity	Congenitally blind	Ambidextrous	Left	7	Every day
3	37	Female	Retinopathy of prematurity	Congenitally blind	Ambidextrous	Right	7	Every day
4	28	Female	Retinopathy of prematurity	Congenitally blind	Right-handed	Right	8	Every day
5	25	Male	Retinopathy of prematurity	Congenitally blind	Ambidextrous	Left	7	Rarely
6	34	Male	Undefined (genetic)	Congenitally blind	Right-handed	Left	7	Every day
7	32	Female	Retinopathy of prematurity	Congenitally blind	Ambidextrous	Left	6	Rarely
8	43	Male	Atrophy of the optic nerve	Congenitally blind	Right-handed	Left (index finger)	7	Rarely
9	31	Male	Retinopathy of prematurity	Congenitally blind	Right-handed	Right	5	Once a week
10	32	Female	Retinopathy of prematurity	Congenitally blind	Ambidextrous	Right (index finger)	7	Rarely
11	40	Female	Atrophy of the optic nerve	Congenitally blind	Right-handed	Right (index finger)	7	Every day
12	39	Female	Retinopathy of prematurity	Congenitally blind	Right-handed	Left (index finger)	6	Often
13	40	Female	Retinopathy of prematurity	Congenitally blind	Right-handed	Left	6	None
14	30	Female	Atrophy of the optic nerve	Congenitally blind	Ambidextrous	Right	4	Rarely
15	30	Male	Optic nerve hypoplasia	Congenitally blind	Ambidextrous	Right	7	Once a week
16	39	Male	Retinopathy of prematurity	Congenitally blind	Ambidextrous	Left	5	Rarely
17	27	Male	Retinopathy of prematurity	Congenitally blind	Right-handed	Right	7	Rarely
18	45	Female	Retinopathy of prematurity	Congenitally blind	Ambidextrous	Left	7	Rarely
19	45	Male	Retinopathy of prematurity	Congenitally blind	Ambidextrous	Left	7	Rarely
20	22	Male	Microphthalmia	Congenitally blind	Ambidextrous	Left	4	Every day
21	45	Female	Retinopathy of prematurity	Congenitally blind	Right-handed	Right (index finger)	7	Every day
22	31	Female	Atrophy of the optic nerve	Congenitally blind	Ambidextrous	Right (index finger)	7	Often
23	31	Male	Retinopathy of prematurity	Congenitally blind	Ambidextrous	Left	6	Once a week
24	35	Female	Congenital glaucoma	Congenitally blind	Ambidextrous	Both	7	Rarely
25	23	Male	Atrophy of the optic nerve	Congenitally blind	Ambidextrous	Left (index finger)	7	Every day
26	22	Male	Retinopathy of prematurity	Congenitally blind	Ambidextrous	Left (index finger)	6	Every day
27	33	Male	Atrophy of the optic nerve	Congenitally blind	Right-handed	Left (index finger)	6	Rarely
28	29	Male	Retinopathy of prematurity	Congenitally blind	Right-handed	Left (index finger)	7	Rarely
29	36	Female	Undefined (genetic)	Congenitally blind	Ambidextrous	Right (index finger)	4	Often
30	42	Male	Toxoplasmosis	Congenitally blind	Right-handed	Right (index finger)	8	Often
31	35	Female	Undefined (genetic)	Congenitally blind	Right-handed	Right (index finger)	4	Rarely
32	40	Male	Eye injury	3	Ambidextrous	Right (index finger)	6	Rarely
33	23	Female	Glaucoma	4	Right-handed	Left (middle finger)	4	Rarely
34	26	Female	Retinal detachment	17	Right-handed	Left (index finger)	17	Rarely
35	38	Male	Glaucoma	21	Right-handed	Right (index finger)	22	None
36	45	Female	Eye injury	23	Right-handed	Left (index finger)	19	Often

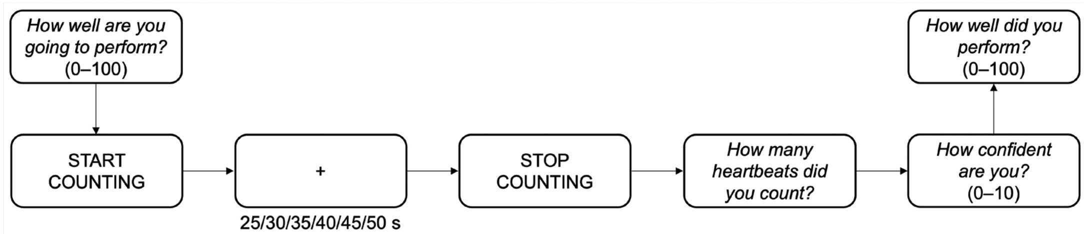
participants' travel expenses were reimbursed. The documents were read to blind participants by the experimenter, and the signature location was indicated with tactile markers.

Experimental Tasks and Procedure

All volunteers were naïve to the experimental procedure. At the very beginning of the experiment and prior to the behavioral tasks, the participants were asked to fill out a questionnaire regarding their bodily experiences. Since increased physiological arousal has been shown to provide an advantage for heartbeat perception (Pollatos, Herbert, et al., 2007), to allow for any potentially elevated heart rates due to walking at a fast pace to the building, etc., to return to a normal level, we asked the participants to fill out the questionnaire at the beginning rather than the end of the procedure. The Multidimensional Assessment of Interoceptive Awareness (MAIA; Mehling et al., 2012; see Brytek-Matera & Kozieł, 2015 for a Polish translation and validation) is a 32-item tool that measures interoceptive body awareness, which consists of eight subscales, namely, *Noticing*, *Not-Distracting*, *Not-Worrying*, *Attention Regulation*, *Emotional Awareness*, *Self-Regulation*, *Body Listening*, and *Trusting*; the questionnaire has a range of scores of 0–5, with 0 indicating low and 5 indicating high interoceptive body awareness. For the same reason as that described above, that is, to prevent potentially elevated heart rates, the participants were also asked not to consume any caffeinated drinks on the day of the experiment (see Hartley et al., 2004; McMullen et al., 2012).

Before the start of the behavioral part of the experiment, all the participants were informed about the experimental setup and received a short description of the procedure (see Figure 1 for an overview of the experimental design). Then, each participant sat on a chair in a comfortable position. A heart rate baseline reading was obtained over a period of 5 min before the beginning of the counting task. The participants' heart rate was recorded using a Biopac MP150 BN-PPGED pulse oximeter (Goleta, CA, United States) attached to their left index finger and connected to a laptop with AcqKnowledge software (Version 5.0), which recorded the number of heartbeats within the preset time. Then, the number of heartbeats was quantified using the embedded "count peaks" function. To reduce the possibility that participants would perceive pulsation in their fingers due to the grip of the pulse oximeter, attention was given to ensure a comfortable and not overly tight fit of the finger cuff. Sighted subjects were blindfolded while performing the tasks.

Figure 1
Overview of the Experimental Design



Participants were given the following instructions: "Without manually checking, can you silently count each heartbeat you feel in your body from the time you hear 'start' to when you hear 'stop'? Do not take your pulse or feel on your chest with your hand. You are only allowed to feel the sensation of your heart beating" (adapted from Garfinkel et al., 2015). The latter part of the instruction was added to follow the recommendation to stress the need of reporting genuinely felt heartbeats only (see Desmedt et al., 2020). After the trial, the participants verbally reported the number of heartbeats counted. They did not receive any feedback regarding their performance. Immediately after reporting the number of counted heartbeats, participants were asked to rate their confidence in the perceived accuracy of their response (see Garfinkel et al., 2015). This confidence judgment was made using a scale ranging from 0 (*total guess/no heartbeat awareness*) to 10 (*complete confidence/full perception of heartbeat*). A rest period of 30 s was given before the next trial began. The task was repeated six times to form six trials, using intervals of 25, 30, 35, 40, 45, and 50 s, presented in a random order. The participants received no information about the interval length.

To examine an additional dimension of metacognitive reflection, namely, prior and posterior beliefs of one's performance (see Fleming et al., 2016; Kirsch et al., 2021), after receiving the instruction of the task and being given an opportunity to ask clarifying questions, the participants were also asked to assess their prospective performance in the task in relation to all trials. Thus, before the task, they were given the following instruction: *Now that I explained you the task, how well are you going to perform in the task on a scale ranging from 0 (not so well/total guess) to 100 (very well/very accurate)?* After completing the task, participants were asked to reflect on their performance in all trials and were given the following instructions: *Now that you have done the task, how well did you perform in the task on a scale ranging from 0 (not so well/total guess) to 100 (very well/very accurate)?* These data were analyzed separately from the confidence judgments provided after every trial.

To examine a potential relationship between interoceptive and tactile abilities, we also employed a measure of tactile acuity, namely, the grating orientation task (Johnson & Phillips, 1981). The stimuli used in this procedure were composed of eight hemispheric plastic domes that were stamped with equally wide parallel bars and grooves (JVP—Johnson-Van Boven-Phillips—Spatial Discrimination Domes, Stoelting, Inc. Wood Dale, IL), with widths of the following sizes: 0.35, 0.5, 0.75, 1, 1.2, 1.5, 2, and 3 mm. During the task, the right index finger of the participant was fixated on a table in a palm-up position. Gratings were applied with moderate force by a trained experimenter to the distal pad of the right index finger for ∼1.5 s. The experimenter took care to avoid any movement of the participant's finger caused by contact with the grating. The stimuli were applied in either a horizontal or vertical manner relative to the long axis of the finger. A two-alternative forced-choice paradigm was used in which participants were asked to report whether the orientation of the grating was horizontal or vertical. The task consisted of eight blocks, with one for each grating width, while each block consisted of 20 randomized trials, half with gratings presented horizontally and half with gratings presented vertically. The order of blocks was fixed and corresponded to decreasing width of the gratings. No feedback about the accuracy of the response was given to the participants at any time. The grating orientation threshold was calculated by linear interpolation between grating widths spanning 75% correct responses (see Merabet et al., 2008; Van Boven & Johnson, 1994; Wong, Gnanakumaran, & Goldreich, 2011). This standard psychophysical threshold criterion was chosen because it is midway between chance and perfect performance (see Guilford, 1954). Eight participants from the blind group and 12 participants from the sighted group were excluded from this particular analysis because they could not perform the grating orientation task beyond the expected level (75% accuracy). This is a standard procedure when using the grating orientation task (e.g., Wong, Hackeman, et al., 2011). The results of the between-group comparison of the grating orientation threshold are described in detail in Radziun, Crucianelli, et al. (2022).

After completing the tasks described in this study, the same participants also took part in two other behavioral experiments that examined body perception, which were not related to the current study's research questions, and that will be reported separately (Radziun, Crucianelli, et al. 2022).

Data Analysis

Interoceptive Accuracy

For each participant, an accuracy score was derived, resulting in the following formula for interoceptive accuracy across all trials (see Schandry, 1981):

$$\frac{1}{6}\Sigma\left(1-\frac{|\text{recordedheartbeats}-\text{countedheartbeats}|}{\text{recordedheartbeats}}\right). \qquad (1)$$

The interoceptive accuracy scores obtained following this transformation usually vary between 0 and 1, with higher scores indicating more accurate counting of the heartbeats (i.e., smaller differences between counted and actual heartbeats), although in case of extreme values reported as counted heartbeats, the formula allows a score ranging from negative infinity to 1. Two blind participants who failed to perform the task were excluded from further analyses (extremely low accuracy levels of −0.128 and −1.178; see also *Plan of statistical analysis*). Importantly, including these participants in the interoceptive accuracy analysis or using another formula (as in Garfinkel et al., 2015) did not change the statistical significance of the result (see Results in online supplemental materials).

Interoceptive Sensibility

MAIA scores served as an indication of the general interoceptive sensibility. Higher scores indicated higher interoceptive sensibility.

Interoceptive Awareness

First, the mean confidence during the heartbeat counting task was calculated for every participant by averaging the confidence judgments over all the experimental trials to produce a global measure of confidence in perceived accuracy of response. Then, to provide an index of interoceptive awareness, a correlation coefficient between the accuracy score (see section *Interoceptive accuracy*) and the confidence ratings was calculated.

Plan of Statistical Analysis

The data were tested for normality using the Shapiro–Wilk test and found to be not distributed normally ($p < .05$). Therefore, nonparametric statistics were used (Mann–Whitney U test for independent group comparisons and Spearman's *rho* for correlations). All p values were two-tailed. Data exclusion criteria were established prior to data analysis.

For the Bayesian analyses, the default Cauchy prior was used. BF_{01} indicates support for the null over the alternative hypothesis, and BF_{10} indicates support for the alternative hypothesis over null hypothesis (e.g., a $BF_{01} = 8$ means 8 times more support for the null hypothesis, while $BF_{10} = 8$ means 8 times more support for the alternative hypothesis). BFs between 0.333 and 3 are normally considered inconclusive (Jarosz & Wiley, 2014; Lee & Wagenmakers, 2014).

Transparency and Openness

We report how we determined our sample size, all data exclusions, all manipulations, and all measures in the study. The data that support the findings of this study are available at https://osf.io/v56es/. The data were analyzed and visualized with RStudio software, Version 1.4.1717, and the BayesFactor software package, Version 0.9.12-4.2. For data visualization, the raincloud plots were used (Allen et al., 2019). This study was not preregistered.

Results

Interoceptive Accuracy

Our results revealed that blind individuals had better interoceptive accuracy than sighted controls, as reflected by significantly higher performance in the heartbeat counting task ($W = 836$, $p = 0.008$, 95% CI[0.030, 0.240], $BF_{10} = 10.540$; $M_{\text{Blind}} = 0.779$, $SD_{\text{Blind}} = 0.166$, $M_{\text{Control}} = 0.630$, $SD_{\text{Control}} = 0.237$; Figure 2). The baseline performance in the sighted control group was comparable to the results obtained in other studies using the heartbeat counting task paradigm (e.g., $M = 0.66$ in Garfinkel et al., 2015; $M = 0.65$ in Ricciardi et al., 2016; $M = 0.61$ in Von Mohr et al., 2021), which highlights that the task was successfully implemented in the present study and that the blind group showed a level of accuracy that was significantly higher than the values normally reported in the literature.

The heart rate was equivalent for both groups ($W = 569$, $p = 0.613$, 95% CI[−6.000, 3.400], $BF_{01} = 3.479$; $M_{\text{Blind}} = 76.347$, $SD_{\text{Blind}} = 10.441$, $M_{\text{Control}} = 77.794$, $SD_{\text{Control}} = 9.663$). Therefore, the potential influence of heart rate, which has been shown to be a factor that affects performance (e.g., Radziun, Crucianelli, & Ehrsson, 2022), could be excluded as an explanation for the effect observed here.

Interoceptive Sensibility

There was no significant difference in average MAIA scores between the groups ($W = 607$, $p = 0.953$, 95% CI[−0.276, 0.320], $BF_{01} = 4.046$; $M_{\text{Blind}} = 2.885$, $SD_{\text{Blind}} = 0.643$, $M_{\text{Control}} = 2.900$, $SD_{\text{Control}} = 0.561$; Figure 3A), which shows that there was no difference in subjective interoceptive sensibility between the blind group and the sighted control group. No significant differences between the groups emerged when comparing the MAIA subscales separately (all $p > 0.05$; Figure 3B).

Interoceptive sensibility, as measured by the MAIA, and interoceptive accuracy did not correlate in either the blind group ($\varrho = 0.183$, $p = 0.298$, 95% CI[−0.165, 0.491], $BF_{01} = 2.223$) or the sighted controls ($\varrho = 0.253$, $p = 0.136$, [−0.082, 0.537], $BF_{01} = 1.517$), which suggests that subjectively reported sensitivity to bodily sensations does not align with interoceptive accuracy regardless of the visual experience, although the Bayesian analysis suggests this finding to be inconclusive.

Interoceptive Awareness

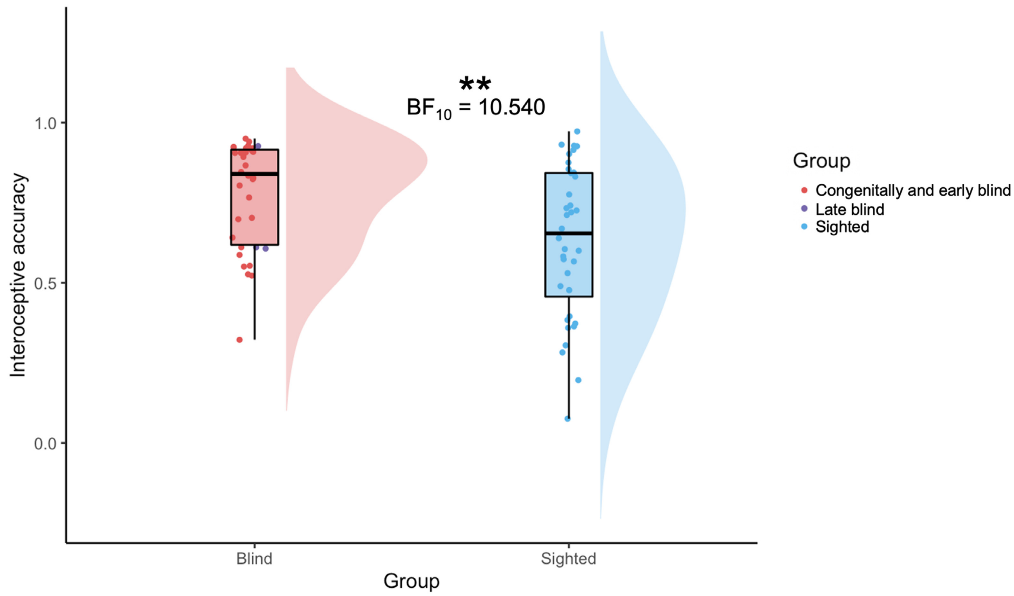
In the blind group, we did not find a significant correlation between interoceptive accuracy, as measured by heartbeat counting task, and interoceptive sensibility, as measured by the average confidence ratings ($\varrho = 0.277$, $p = 0.113$, 95% CI[−0.067, 0.563], $BF_{01} = 0.362$; Figure 4A; note the inconclusive Bayesian evidence). This correlation was found in the sighted control group ($\varrho = 0.484$, $p = 0.003$, [0.185, 0.701], $BF_{10} = 39.449$; Figure 4B). However, a Fisher's Z test comparing two correlations based on independent groups did not find a significant difference between the two coefficients, further corroborated by Zou's (2007) confidence intervals ($Z = -0.781$, $p = 0.435$; [−0.546, 0.232]).

Notably, there was no significant difference in the mean confidence ratings between the blind group and the sighted control group ($W = 601.5$, $p = 0.902$, 95% CI[−1.333, 1.000], $BF_{01} = 3.881$; $M_{\text{Blind}} = 5.637$, $SD_{\text{Blind}} = 2.501$, $M_{\text{Control}} = 5.819$, $SD_{\text{Control}} = 2.145$; Figure 5).

Belief of Performance Accuracy

We found no difference between the blind and sighted control groups in regard to their belief of performance accuracy, for both completion before the task ($W = 460.5$, $p = 0.074$, $BF_{01} = 1.129$; $M_{\text{Blind}} = 50.588$, $SD_{\text{Blind}} = 27.900$, $M_{\text{Control}} = 61.472$, $SD_{\text{Control}} = 24.455$; note the inconclusive Bayesian evidence) and completion after the task ($W = 543$, $p = 0.415$, $BF_{01} = 3.006$; $M_{\text{Blind}} = 51$,

Figure 2
Interoceptive Accuracy



Note. Interoceptive accuracy, as measured using the heartbeat counting task, was elevated in blind individuals compared to sighted controls. The boxplots depict the data based on their median (thick black line) and quartiles (upper and lower ends of boxes). The vertical lines, that is, the whiskers, indicate the minimum or maximum values within 1.5× the interquartile range above and below the upper and lower quartiles. The datapoints outside the vertical lines are the outlier observations, the furthest being the minimum or maximum values in the data. The following figures are formatted in the same fashion.

$SD_{\text{Blind}} = 26.212$, $M_{\text{Control}} = 56.083$, $SD_{\text{Control}} = 24.450$). Similarly, we did not find a difference in the belief of performance accuracy when comparing the pre-task and post-task neither in the blind ($V = 212$, $p = 0.905$, $BF_{01} = 5.402$) nor in the sighted ($V = 362.5$, $p = 0.142$, $BF_{01} = 1.657$; note the inconclusive Bayesian evidence) groups.

Relationship Between Interoceptive Accuracy and Tactile Acuity

We found no correlation between interoceptive accuracy and tactile acuity in either the blind ($\varrho = -0.209$, $p = 0.293$, 95% CI [−0.546, 0.185], $BF_{01} = 1.954$) or sighted control ($\varrho = -0.101$, $p = 0.640$, [−0.484, 0.316], $BF_{01} = 2.047$) groups (Figure 6), although the Bayesian analysis suggests this finding to be inconclusive.

Discussion

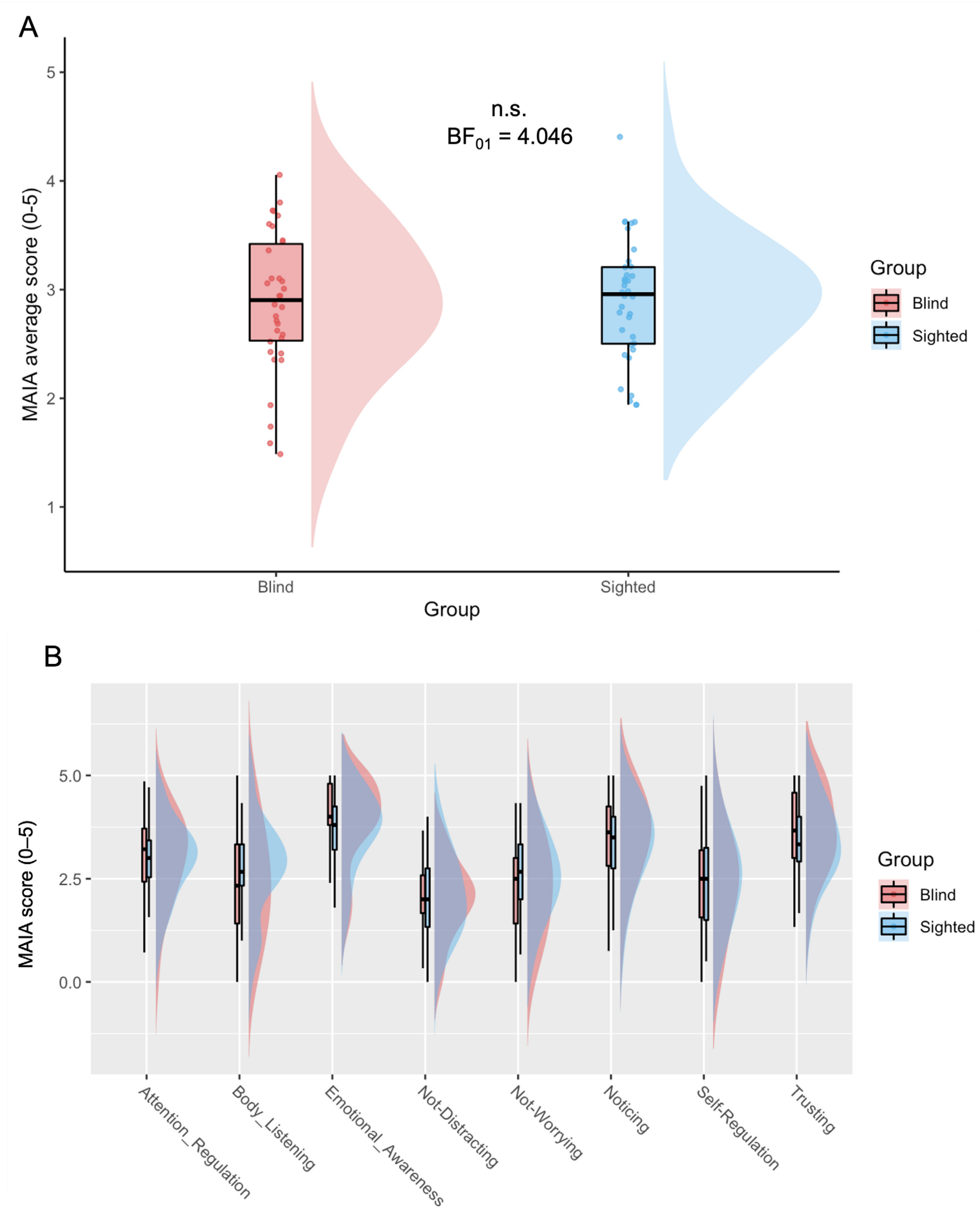
In this study, we investigated the effect of blindness on cardiac interoception. Consistent with our hypothesis, we found that the blind group performed better than the sighted control group on the heartbeat counting task; that is, blind individuals had better cardiac interoceptive accuracy compared to the control group. Interestingly, this effect appears to pertain only to sensory abilities; we did not find any differences in regard to interoceptive sensibility as measured by a subjective questionnaire, namely, the MAIA. We also did not find differences in confidence in the given response or belief of performance accuracy, which were measured both before and after task completion. We did not find differences in heart rate either, which makes the possibility that the observed effect was due to a potential discrepancy between the groups occurring at the physiological level unlikely. Taken together, our results suggest that blind people are better able to sense their own heartbeats compared to their sighted counterparts.

The reasons behind our main result could be twofold. On the one hand, this result could reflect a genuinely increased perceptual ability to use the visceral information from rhythmic cardiovascular events felt in the chest, which leads to more accurate counting of heartbeats. This is the most straightforward and the most likely interpretation, especially considering the results of the tactile control task and the fact that the task instruction emphasized reporting genuinely felt heartbeats. An alternative interpretation that we cannot exclude is that blind individuals showed a more accurate performance in the task because they were better at sensing pulsations from different locations in their body (see also Betka et al., 2021) and picking up subtle cues from forehead, limbs, etc., thus relying more on multisensory integration of various somatosensory and interoceptive signals related to the heartbeats rather than sensory signals from the heart that are mediated through the vagal nerve (Prescott & Liberles, 2022). Future studies should investigate this further; however, in either case, and regardless of the underlying sensory mechanism, the current results are important because they suggest that in general, blind individuals are better at perceiving their heartbeats than sighted individuals.

What kind of mechanism could trigger the kind of cross-modal plasticity that would lead to improvements in cardiac interoception? Several studies with blind individuals have suggested that their

Figure 3

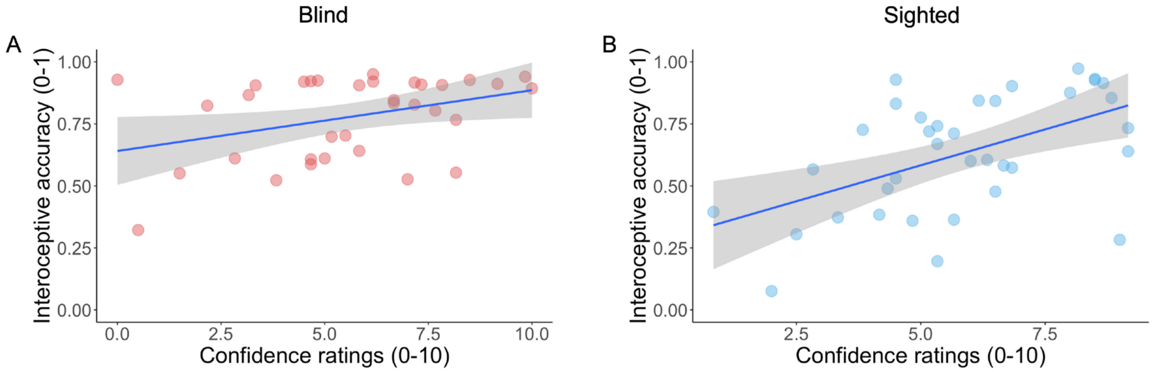
Interoceptive Sensibility (MAIA)



Note. There was no difference between the blind group and the sighted control group in interoceptive sensibility, as measured with the Multidimensional Assessment of Interoceptive Awareness (MAIA). Figure 3A exhibits average MAIA scores. Figure 3B shows all MAIA subscales separately.

improved sensory acuity is not necessarily driven by the lack of vision itself, but rather due to the experience-dependent neuroplastic mechanisms—caused by, for example, increased training of the hands due to tactile exploration of everyday objects and Braille reading (Alary et al., 2009; Sathian & Stilla, 2010; Voss, 2011; Wong, Gnanakumaran, & Goldreich, 2011). However, such an explanation seems unlikely for the enhancements in cardiac interoceptive accuracy observed in our study. Tactile training among blind individuals is predominantly involuntary and associated with exploring the environment and performing various daily activities, while interoceptive functions are usually not trained in this way. A potential interoceptive equivalent of tactile training could be the practice of meditation.

Figure 4
Interoceptive Awareness

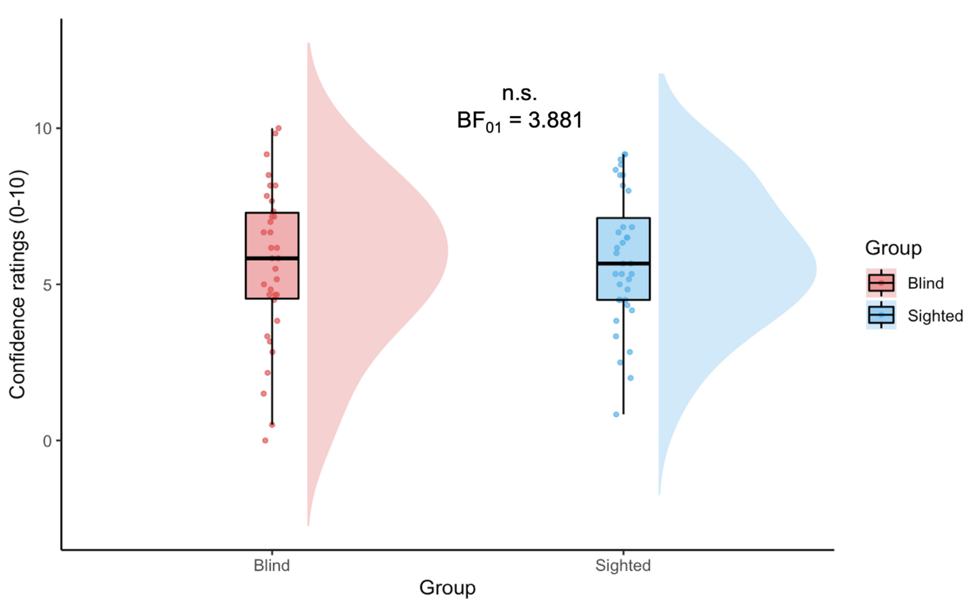


Note. Confidence–accuracy correlation in the blind group (Panel A) and in the sighted control group (Panel B).

However, previous research has suggested that regular meditation does not lead to superior interoceptive accuracy (e.g., Khalsa et al., 2008, 2020; see also Farb et al., 2013). Given that the experience-dependent explanation of the effect observed in our study seems unlikely, the results fit better in the theoretical framework of cross-modal plasticity occurring because of visual deprivation itself. In this view, the lack of visual experience leads to neuroplastic changes in sensory, multisensory, and visual areas and their anatomical interconnections that provide greater neural processing capacities for the remaining senses, including cardiac interoception, as has been revealed by the current results. The fact that such heightened cross-modal plasticity effects go beyond the exteroceptive senses of hearing, discriminative touch, and olfaction to include sensations from an inner visceral organ is particularly noteworthy, as it advances our understanding of the extent of such effects and related perceptual enhancements.

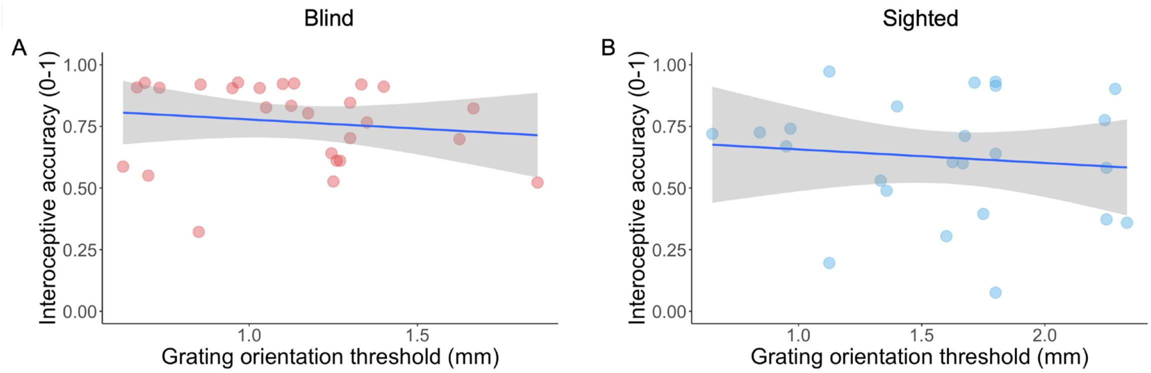
What could be the neuroanatomical basis for the current findings of enhanced heartbeat counting accuracy? One of the regions that are important for the processing of afferent visceral information, including cardiac signals, is the anterior insula (see Critchley et al., 2004). Interestingly, visual deprivation has recently been found to reshape the functional architecture within anterior insular subregions (Liu et al., 2017). Although it is not clear how these neuroplastic changes are related to the ability to perceive heartbeats or other visceral signals, future neuroimaging studies could explore this possible link. Furthermore, the observed enhancement could also be due to structural changes within the deprived occipital cortex. Indeed, previous studies have reported a relationship between increased occipital

Figure 5
Confidence Ratings



Note. There was no difference between the blind and sighted control groups in the average confidence ratings.

Figure 6
Correlation Between Interoceptive Accuracy and Tactile Acuity



Note. Correlation between interoceptive accuracy and tactile acuity in the blind group (A) and in the sighted control group (B).

cortical thickness and enhanced performance within the auditory modality (Voss & Zatorre, 2012). Future studies might elucidate the relationship between structural changes in the brains of blind individuals and their superior performance in sensory tasks.

Surprisingly, in our study, we did not observe a significant correlation between interoceptive accuracy and interoceptive sensibility (as measured by confidence ratings) in blind individuals, although the Bayesian analysis suggested this result to be inconclusive. In the sighted group, in turn, this correlation was positive, significant, and supported by Bayesian statistics. However, a test comparing these correlations did not find a significant difference between the two coefficients. In previous studies, higher levels of interoceptive accuracy have been associated with higher interoceptive awareness and lower interoceptive accuracy with no relationship between accuracy and sensibility (e.g., García-Cordero et al., 2016; Garfinkel et al., 2015; Murphy et al., 2018). In other words, healthy-sighted people who do well on the heartbeat counting task also have a metacognitive awareness that they are doing well, whereas individuals who perform poorly also do less well in judging how poor their performance is. The present findings may indicate that this relationship might be different in blind individuals, suggesting a lowered insight into sensory abilities. Most of the blind participants performed better on the task than sighted, showing ceiling-level task performance, so less variability in the data in the blind group could have prevented emerging of a significant relationship with the confidence ratings. In fact, ceiling-level task performance has been shown in previous studies to bias the accuracy-confidence correspondence (Fleming & Lau, 2014). This would also be consistent with the results from the MAIA questionnaire that suggested no differences in how the blind and sighted participants rated a range of sensations related to various aspects of interoception in their daily life. However, Beaulieu-Lefebvre et al. (2011) reported that blind individuals scored higher than sighted individuals on a scale that assessed sensibility to olfactory sensations, although subsequent studies did not find conclusive evidence for the difference between blind and sighted individuals in metacognitive abilities in relation to olfactory task performance (Cornell Kärnekull et al., 2016). Future studies should clarify whether insight into perceptual abilities among blind people might vary between interoceptive and exteroceptive senses.

It is well known that internal bodily signals—cardiac signals in particular—are in a mutual interactive relationship with emotion processing (see Adolfi et al., 2017; Critchley & Garfinkel, 2017; Critchley & Harrison, 2013; Garfinkel & Critchley, 2016; Pollatos, Gramann, & Schandry, 2007; Shah et al., 2017). Changes in afferent interoceptive inputs from the heart modulate subjective emotions (e.g., the intensity of experiencing fear; see Garfinkel et al., 2014), and changes in emotion can trigger various physiological peripheral reactions in the body (e.g., increasing heart rate), which in turn modulate the ascending interoceptive signals in the brain. Thus, enhanced heartbeat counting accuracy in blind individuals may modulate these body-brain interactions and lead to changes in emotional processing. Furthermore, it has been suggested that the degree to which an individual is able to recognize their own interoceptive states positively correlates with how well they recognize emotions in themselves and in others (Ernst et al., 2014; Herbert et al., 2007; Shah et al., 2016; Shah et al., 2017; Terasawa et al., 2014; Tsakiris, 2017; Wiens et al., 2000; but see also Ainley et al., 2015). Blind individuals do not show impairments in emotion processing (Gamond et al., 2017); moreover, they show better discrimination of emotional information, along with increased amygdala activation to emotional auditory stimuli (Klinge et al., 2010, 2012), where the amygdala, along with the insula, is one of the critical structures for interoception and emotion processing (Critchley et al., 2002). Therefore, our results could provide a missing explanatory link between improved emotional processing and increased sensory acuity in blind individuals.

Our results could also have important implications for future research on bodily awareness and self-consciousness in blind individuals. Heartbeats are one of the first sensory cues emerging during early development, occurring 5½ to 6 weeks after gestation; even young infants seem to perceive their own heartbeats, as demonstrated in behavioral paradigms (Maister et al., 2017; but see also Weijs et al., 2022). Thus, together with proprioceptive feedback from movements, cardiac interoceptive signals may play an important role in the developing central nervous system in regard to laying the foundation for sensory processing and the sense of self (see also Quigley et al., 2021). In sighted individuals, visual experience later becomes crucial when the infant learns to interact with external objects and recognizes their own body parts through movement and visuotactile feedback (Chen et al., 2018; Rochat & Striano, 2000; Zmyj et al., 2011). These visual experiences of the self and the world presumably drive the development of a multisensory sense of the bodily self (Bremner, 2016); however, in blind individuals who lack this kind of information, interoception may play a relatively greater role. It has been shown that congenitally blind individuals exhibit changes in the multisensory representation of their own body (Nava et al., 2014; Petkova et al., 2012). Thus, the current findings might be important for future research into how bodily awareness and self-consciousness develop and are maintained without vision and how enhanced ability to sense cardiac signals may modulate bodily awareness and self-consciousness in blind individuals.

A potential limitation of the study is that we used a single method to probe interoceptive accuracy, the heartbeat counting task. We chose this task because it is still one of the most widely used tasks to register heartbeat perception, which made it possible to compare the current findings with the previous literature. This allowed us to find that heartbeat counting accuracy in blind individuals is notably better than has previously been reported in many studies on sighted individuals (e.g., Garfinkel et al., 2015; Ricciardi et al., 2016; Von Mohr et al., 2021). The task is also particularly suitable for blind individuals since it does not rely on other sensory modalities (see further below). However, the validity of the task itself has recently been debated and criticized (see Ainley et al., 2020; Corneille et al., 2020; Desmedt et al., 2018; Zamariola et al., 2018; Zimprich et al., 2020), and it has been pointed out that there are cognitive factors related to the task that can potentially influence performance in addition to the heartbeat perception *per se*, for example, time estimation abilities (Desmedt et al., 2020), although the evidence is mixed (Schulz et al., 2021). The task remains, however, the optimal choice for the research question presented here and in fact supports the validity of using heartbeat counting task to identify between-group differences. First of all, we followed the best practices of utilizing the heartbeat counting task (see Ferentzi et al., 2022). Second, there is no evidence of differences between blind and sighted individuals in time estimation abilities (see Bottini et al., 2015). Finally, the other most widely used task in interoception research, the heartbeat discrimination task (Brener & Kluvitse, 1988; Katkin et al., 1983; Whitehead et al., 1977) uses flashes or tones that are presented synchronously or asynchronously with one's heartbeat; the participant needs to judge whether they reflected their heartbeat or not, effectively engaging multisensory (interoceptive-visual, interoceptive-auditory) mechanisms. Multisensory integration has been shown to be altered in blind individuals (Collignon et al., 2009; Crollen et al., 2017). Therefore, using a task with multisensory demands on a population manifesting differences in multisensory integration could risk leading to observing an effect (or lack of it) that is due to characteristics unrelated to the actual interoceptive abilities. Recently, some promising interoceptive tasks have been introduced (see Legrand et al., 2022; Plans et al., 2021), although they also include an auditory component. Future studies should aim to replicate the effect we observed here with a task that is tapping into interoceptive processing without potential multisensory confounds (e.g., Larsson et al., 2021) .

In conclusion, we have conducted the first study on cardiac interoceptive abilities in blind individuals and found that blind individuals are better than their sighted counterparts at sensing their own heartbeats. The results can contribute to our understanding of the fundamental constraints of heightened cross-modal plasticity after blindness by suggesting that visual deprivation leads to interoceptive plasticity, which may have interesting potential implications for emotional processing, bodily awareness, and the conscious experience of the self.

Context of Research

This study is part of a larger collaborative effort between two research groups interested in bodily awareness and brain plasticity following blindness. Across several experiments, we investigate a topic virtually unexplored by both research communities: how blind individuals perceive their own bodies. We examine interoception, affective touch, multisensory integration, and their neuroanatomical basis, intending to provide the first detailed description of differences and similarities between blind and sighted individuals in various aspects of bodily perception. The next step is to explore mental health indicators and examine how they relate to body-related processes in these groups.

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