

# In the news

## BODY CONSCIOUSNESS

In the non-scientific literature, out-of-body experiences are often associated with such mysterious supernatural events as astral projection, remote viewing and visiting 'the other side'. In reality they may be more down to earth, but they are not any less interesting.

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Two recent papers in *Science* show that out-of-body experiences can be induced in healthy people using a virtual reality paradigm based on the 'rubber hand illusion', in which the sensory experiences of sight and touch conflict. The volunteers in the studies looked at a virtual image of a body that was being poked with a stick while their own body was touched in the same place. This caused them to feel as though they had left their body, and were watching themselves from outside.

According to Henrik Ehrsson of the Karolinska Institute in Stockholm, Sweden, the author of one of the two studies, the illusion "reveals the basic mechanism that produces the feeling of being inside the physical body," (*Timesonline.co.uk*, 24 August 2007). "We feel that our self is located where the eyes are," says Ehrsson. (*BBC news*)

Susan Blackmore, of the University of the West of England, Bristol, UK, remarks that "Scientists have long suspected that the clue to these extraordinary, and sometimes life-changing, experiences lies in disrupting our normal illusion of being a self behind our eyes." (*BBC news*, 23 August 2007)

These studies shed light on that most elusive of neuroscience subjects — the nature of consciousness — as "...the experience of one's own body as the centre of awareness is a fundamental aspect of self-consciousness," says Ehrsson (*Timesonline.co.uk*). If these experiments can be performed on people lying inside a functional MRI scanner, perhaps they might one day reveal the neural correlates of the self.

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