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November 2021

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Mirroring and brain connectivity of gesture observation

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DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.7358/neur-2021-030-fron>

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ABSTRACT

Non-verbal communication involves different channels, as gestures, to communicate different information. The present study aims investigating the electrophysiological (EEG) correlates underlying the use of affective, social, and informative gestures during gesture observation by an encoder (who observed to reproduce the gestures successively) and decoder (who simply observed the gestures). Mirroring mechanisms were considered for a gesture observation task. Results showed an increase of frontal alpha, delta, and theta brain responsiveness and intra-brain connectivity for affective and social gestures; and of posterior (temporo-parietal) alpha activity and alpha and delta intra-brain connectivity for informative ones. Concerning inter-agents' role, similar responses were found for all gestures. Regarding gesture valence, an increase of delta and theta activity was observed for positive gestures on the left cerebral side. This study, therefore, revealed the function of gestures' type and valence in influencing individuals' brain activity, showing the presence of mirroring mechanisms underlying gesture observation.

Keywords: gestures; observation; EEG; mirroring

1. INTRODUCTION

Among the various bodily forms of expression, gestures are configured as a set of motor actions that characterize individuals' verbal and non-verbal communication (McNeill, 1992, 2013), allowing, emphasizing, and completing the transmission of different information (Cabrera et al., 2017). Given gestures' multifunctionality, several neuroscientific studies have focused on brain patterns and cognitive processes underlying gesture observation (Cabrera et al., 2017, 2020) demonstrating the presence of different cerebral areas involved in gesture perception (Caspers et al., 2010; Chong et al., 2008; Molenberghs et al., 2012).

As revealed by different studies (Cabrera et al., 2020; Schippers et al., 2010), gesture observation activates specific cerebral networks (Caspers et al., 2010), such as the mirror neural system, which appears to support actions predictive and understanding processes (Balconi & Fronda, 2020a,b, 2021a,b; Costantini et al., 2005; Kilner & Blakemore, 2007; Rizzolatti & Sinigaglia, 2010; Urgen et al., 2013). Specifically, certain brain areas, such as fronto-parietal regions, appear to be involved in mirroring mechanisms underlying actions understanding (Costantini et al., 2005), providing a direct link between gesture observation and execution (Balconi et al., 2020, 2021; Balconi & Fronda, 2020a,b, 2021a,b; Fronda & Balconi 2020; Holle et al., 2008).

In this perspective, the direct bond between gesture perception and production by mirroring function provides the involvement of sensorimotor processes related to previous experiences with the observed gesture (Hamilton et al., 2004; Hecht et al., 2001; Quandt et al., 2012, 2013; Schütz-Bosbach & Prinz, 2007). The involvement of sensorimotor processes during gesture observation was also demonstrated by different studies that have used electroencephalography (EEG) to investigate the brain correlates underlying gesture perception (Balconi & Fronda, 2020b; Muthukumaraswamy et al., 2004; Pineda, 2005; Quandt et al., 2012, 2013). Specifically, EEG, compared to neuroimaging techniques, has proved to be a good neuroscientific tool for the recording of individuals' neural activity (Balconi et al., 2018a; Balconi & Fronda, 2020a,b, 2021a,b; Balconi & Molteni, 2016; Koike et al., 2015) by obtaining a better temporal resolution and providing useful information on functional and local brain networks underlying gesture perception (Buzsáki & Draguhn, 2004; Muthukumaraswamy et al., 2004; Pineda, 2005; Quandt et al., 2012, 2013; Singer, 1999).

About gesture observation, as demonstrated by previous studies (Balconi & Fronda, 2020b; Muthukumaraswamy et al., 2004; Pineda, 2005; Quandt et al., 2012, 2013), it appears to be associated with changes in both high- and low-frequency bands oscillations.

Specifically, high-frequency bands, such as alpha (8–13 Hz) and beta (14–20 Hz), are particularly involved in sensorimotor mechanisms underlying gesture observation (Balconi & Fronda, 2020b; Mizelle et al., 2010; Puzzo et al., 2011; Quandt et al., 2012; Van Ede et al., 2011) and, in some specific characteristics, like familiarity or speed profile (Wriessnegger et al., 2013) of the observed gesture; while low-frequency bands, such as delta (0.5–4 Hz) and theta (4–8 Hz), are more implicated in emotional processes underlying gesture perception (Balconi & Fronda, 2020b; Holle et al. 2012; Knyazev 2007).

In the present study, the use of EEG in hyperscanning allowed us to investigate the brain responsiveness and intra-brain connectivity of two individuals involved in a non-verbal communicative exchange: the encoder, who observed the gesture to be subsequently reproduced, and the decoder, who observed the gesture to be subsequently received. In particular, the use of hyperscanning paradigm allows us to simultaneously record the neural activity of the two individuals involved in the exchange, providing the possibility to observe the potential presence of differences or similarities in neural responses (Liu et al., 2015; Ruby & Decety, 2004; Stone et al., 2019), during the observation of different types of gesture in term of their category and valence, such as affective, social, and informative gestures of positive and negative valence.

The use of hyperscanning allows investigating individuals' functional connectivity that reflects the correlation between two time series (Friston, 2011) providing information about the activation of inter-agents' individuals and events spatially remote (Balconi et al., 2017b; Balconi & Fronda 2020a,b, 2021a,b; Chaudhary et al., 2011; Zhao et al., 2014). In particular, functional connectivity allows exploring intra-brain links, showing the connectivity within brain regions in single subjects (encoder and decoder) during the non-verbal communication (Balconi & Fronda 2020a,b, 2021a; Falk & Bassett, 2017; Simony et al., 2016) characterized by the use of affective, social and informative gestures with positive or negative valence. Functional connectivity allows information to be obtained on the synchronic and diachronic aspects underlying gestural communication (Vanutelli et al., 2016) that produces a continuous better synchronization, increasing the intra-brain links between brain areas, creating implicit coupling mechanisms in response to mirroring for gesture observation (Balconi & Pagani, 2015; Liu et al., 2015).

In particular, affective gestures are aimed to transmit emotional content or to influence interlocutor emotional states (Balconi & Fronda 2020a,b, 2021a,b; Balconi et al., 2020, 2021; Fronda & Balconi 2020; Tomasello et al., 2005); social gestures are aimed at establishing a social relationship with the interlocutor (Balconi & Fronda, 2020a,b, 2021a,b; Balconi et al., 2020, 2021; Fronda & Balconi, 2020; Bressemer & Müller, 2017; Kendon, 2017), and

informative gestures are aimed at transmitting information relating to the description of a mental or physical state (Balconi & Fronda 2020a,b, 2021a,b; Balconi et al., 2020, 2021; Fronda & Balconi, 2020; Enfield et al., 2007; Kita, 2009). With respect of valence, positive gestures, instead, are aimed at initiating or establishing a relationship with the interlocutor or communicating positive states, while negative ones are aimed to interrupt a relationship or communicate negative states. Regarding gestures valence, different previous studies, according to the dual system model of neural signatures, have demonstrated a different frontal asymmetry in response to positive and negative gestures observation (Balconi et al., 2015; Balconi & Fronda 2020a,b, 2021a,b; Balconi et al., 2020,2021; Davidson 1992; Fronda & Balconi, 2020).

In light of this evidence, firstly, considering gestures category, we expected to observe an increase of frontal brain responsiveness and intra-brain connectivity of high-frequency bands, which are more involved in sensorimotor processes related to gesture observation (Balconi & Fronda, 2020b; Mizelle et al., 2010; Puzzo et al., 2011; Quandt et al., 2012; Schneider et al., 2008; Van Ede et al., 2011; Yuval-Greenberg & Deouell, 2007), and of low-frequency bands, which are more involved in emotional processes related to gesture perception (Balconi & Fronda 2020b; Knyazev, 2007), during the observation of social and affective gestures, compared to informative ones. Indeed, considering the nature of social and affective gestures, frontal areas are the most implicated in socio-emotional and relational processes (Balconi & Caldiroli, 2011; Balconi & Bortolotti, 2012, 2013; Balconi & Fronda, 2020a,b, 2021a,b; Balconi et al., 2011, 2012, 2020, 2021; Fronda & Balconi, 2020; Rameson & Lieberman, 2009; Rosso et al., 2004). Furthermore, we expected to observe a decrease of alpha power (increased brain activity), and an increase of delta and theta brain responsiveness and intra-brain connectivity in temporo-parietal area according to the observation of informative gestures, which require more involvement of attentional processes (Balconi & Fronda, 2020b; Perry et al., 2011; Rushworth et al., 2001).

Secondly, considering instead gesture valence, we expected to observe, for affective, social, and informative gestures, a different frontal asymmetry in relation to positive and negative gesture (Balconi & Fronda, 2020a,b, 2021a,b; Balconi et al., 2015, 2020, 2021; Davidson, 1992; Fronda & Balconi, 2020). In particular, we expected to observe an increase of delta and theta right frontal activity during the observation of negative gestures which, given their purpose, can induce individuals to an “avoidance” behaviour; while, an increase of delta and theta left frontal activity during the observation of positive gestures which induce individuals to an “approach” behavior (Balconi & Fronda, 2020b; De Stefani et al., 2013).

Finally, considering the inter-agents role (encoder or decoder), we

expected to observe a similar brain responsiveness and intra-brain connectivity both in the encoder and in the decoder, due to the presence of mirror mechanisms during others' gesture observation, that allow individuals to understand other mental states, perceiving themselves in joint action and developing "resonance mechanisms" and implicit brain coupling processes (Balconi & Fronda, 2020b, 2021a; Balconi et al., 2018b; Holle et al., 2008; Lindenberger et al., 2009).

2. METHODS

2.1 Participants

The present study was conducted on a sample of thirteen dyads of participants ($M_{\text{age}} = 23.33$; $SD_{\text{age}} = 2.67$) of the same sex. Specifically, dyads were composed by individuals not involved in a friendship or familiar relation. For each dyad, two different roles (encoder or decoder) were randomly assigned to participants. For the participants' recruitment, specific inclusion and exclusion criteria were selected. In particular, inclusion criteria requested the recruitment of individuals aged between 18 and 40 years, with normal or correct visual acuity and normal manual ability. Instead, the following exclusion criteria have been adopted: the presence of clinical or neurological disorders and the experience of stressful events in the last 6 months. The conduction of the research was approved by the local ethics committee of the Department of Psychology of the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart and followed the principles and guidelines of the Helsinki Declaration. In addition, participants took part in the experiment only after having signed the informed consent.

2.2 Procedure

The conduction of the research provided that participants were arranged sitting facing each other at a distance of 60 cm from a computer, used for the administration of 60 videos randomly shown in three blocks.

Firstly, participants were asked to observe the 60 videos, administered through the use of E-Prime 2.0 software (E-prime2 software, Tools Psychology Software Inc., Sharpsburg, Pennsylvania, USA). These videos reproduced 10 positive social gestures, which aimed to start or maintain a social relationship with the interlocutor; 10 negative social gestures, which aimed to interrupt the relationship with the interlocutor; 10 positive affective gestures, aimed at communicating an emotional positive state to the interlocutor; 10 negative

affective gestures, aimed at transmitting a negative emotional state to the interlocutor; 10 positive informative gestures, and 10 negative informative gestures, used to describe a good or bad physical or psychological state to the interlocutor. For informative gestures, the positive or negative valence was determined by a context sentence (for example the informative gesture in which the encoder move the hand upwards with the palm up indicating to the encoder to stand up was preceded by this context: “On the train, someone occupies a reserved place”) shown before the video presentation to allow participants to understand the gesture meaning better (Balconi & Fronda, 2020a,b, 2021a,b; Balconi et al., 2020, 2021; Fronda & Balconi, 2020).

Specifically, videos reproduced a non-verbal communicative interaction between two actors, one of whom reproduced a gesture (encoder), which could be affective, social and informative of positive or negative valence, towards another individual who received the gesture (decoder).

Secondly, participants were asked to reproduce the gestures observed according to their roles. In particular, the encoder had to reproduce the gesture observed towards the decoder, which was only asked to receive the gesture. For the task administration, the following structure was used, consisting of: the presentation of an empty screen (2 sec.), the presentation of a slide containing a contextual sentence to allow individuals to better understand the meaning of the gesture observed (4 sec.), the video with the gesture to be observed (3 sec.), the presentation of an inter-stimulus (4 sec.), and the presentation of a slide containing a “go” signal to inform participants to reproduce the gesture (4 sec.) (Figure 1).

Videos reproducing gestures were previously validated by 14 judges ($M_{age} = 28.34$, $SD_{age} = 0.04$), using a seven-point Likert scale, for the assessment of the following gestures’ characteristics: commonality, frequency of use, complexity, social significance, familiarity, and emotional impact (Balconi et al., 2020, 2021; Balconi & Fronda, 2020a,b, 2021a,b; Fronda & Balconi, 2020). Statistical analyses were subsequently carried out on the following scores to define the categories of stimuli and verify the homogeneity of the previous characteristics. Similarly, experimental subjects were submitted to the same evaluation of gesture after viewing them (after gesture reproduction). Similar effects were found for the subjects, as observed for judges.

2.3 EEG recording and analysis

For the recording of the EEG signal, two 16-channel EEG systems were used (V-AMP: Brain Products, München; LiveAmp: Brain Products, GmbH, Gliching, Germany). Specifically, with the use of two ElectroCaps, electrodes were placed on individuals’ scalps on F3, F1, Fz, F2, F4, T7, T8, C3, Cz, C4,

P3, P1, P2, P4, O1, and O2 positions (Figure 2). Furthermore, an EOG electrode was placed on the external canthi (Balconi & Fronda, 2020a,b, 2021a,b).

For each individual, 5 k Ω electrode impedance was monitored for data collection, and 1000 Hz was used for data sampling with a 0.01–200 Hz input filter and a 50 Hz notch filter. A 0.5–40 Hz bandpass filter was used to filter the acquired data offline. A common offline average reference was calculated (Ludwig et al., 2009) to reduce problems associated with signal-noise. For signals evaluation, portions of data containing artifacts were excluded, and an algorithm using regression analysis in combination with the artifacts average was utilized for ocular artifacts correction. Finally, data were extracted into low and high-frequency bands, as delta (0.5–4 Hz), theta (4–8 Hz), alpha (8–12 Hz), and beta (14–20 Hz) (Keil et al. 2003). The mean EEG power was calculated by averaging data related only to the gesture observation phase, using a 3-second segment.

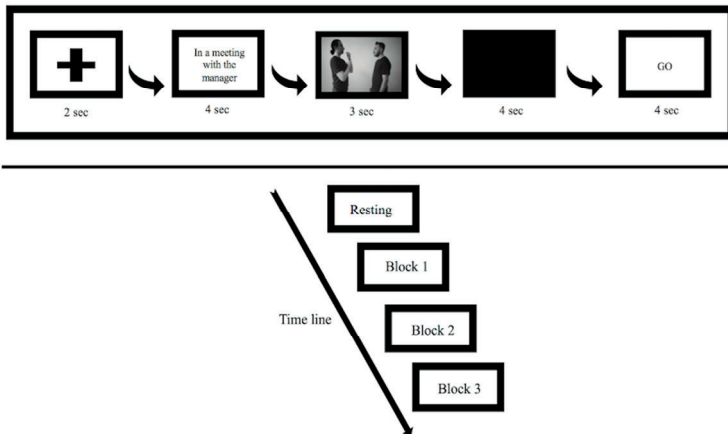


Figure 1. The figure shows the structure of each block of the task

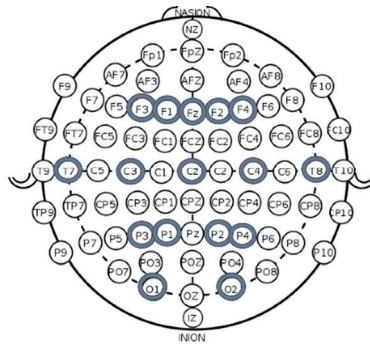


Figure 2. The figure shows the EEG electrode placement in: F3, F1, Fz, F2, F4, T7, C3, Cz, C4, T8, P3, P1, P2, P4, O1, O2

3. DATA ANALYSIS

Related to EEG dependent measures, two sets of analyses were performed. The first ANOVA applied on raw data of single subject was aimed to test the effect of independent measures on each participants' frequency bands. The second set of analyses considered the intra-brain connectivity calculation for each participant on each frequency band.

In particular, to obtain intra-brain connectivity, the partial correlation coefficient Π_{ij} was computed by normalizing the inverse of the covariance matrix $\Gamma = \Sigma^{-1}$:

$$\Gamma = (\Gamma_{ij}) = \Sigma^{-1} \text{ inverse of the covariance matrix}$$

$$\Pi_{ij} = (-\Gamma_{ij}) / \sqrt{\Gamma_{ii}\Gamma_{jj}} \text{ partial correlation matrix}$$

Then, a second ANOVA was applied to these intra-brain measures.

For ANOVAs, these independent measures were used: Role (encoder/decoder, 2), Valence (positive/negative, 2), Lateralization (left/right, 2), Gesture (social/affektive/informative, 3), and ROI (regions of interest, 4). Four ROI were calculated for left/right homologous sides for frontal (F3,F1-F2,F4), central (C3,C4), temporo-parietal (T7,P1-T8,P2), and occipital channels (O1,O2; Balconi & Fronda, 2020a,b, 2021a,b).

For the ANOVAs tests, Greenhouse–Geisser epsilon was used for the correction of freedom degrees.

Post-hoc comparisons (contrast analyses) were applied to the data, and a Bonferroni test was applied for multiple comparisons. In addition, the normality of the data distribution was preliminary tested (kurtosis and asymmetry tests).

The normality assumption of the distribution was supported by these preliminary tests (Balconi & Fronda, 2020a,b, 2021a,b; Balconi et al., 2020, 2021; Fronda & Balconi, 2020).

4. RESULTS

4.1 Brain activity on frequency bands

4.1.1 Delta band

About delta, ANOVA shows a significant Valence X Lateralization X Gesture X ROI interaction effect ($F[6,150] = 11.32$; $p < .001$; $\eta^2 = 0.38$). We only report significant effects for post-hoc analyses. In particular, post-hoc comparisons revealed an increase of delta activity in the frontal area compared to others for affective and social gestures compared to informative gestures (for all post-hoc comparisons $p \leq .001$). Furthermore, an increase of delta activity was observed for positive gestures in the left frontal side compared to the right one ($F[1,26] = 10.34$; $p \leq .001$; $\eta^2 = 0.37$) (Figure 3a).

4.1.2 Theta band

About theta, ANOVA reported a Valence X Lateralization X Gesture X ROI interaction effect ($F[6,150] = 10.78$; $p < .001$; $\eta^2 = 0.37$). Post-hoc comparisons revealed an increase of theta activity in the frontal area compared to others for affective and social gestures compared to informative ones (for all post-hoc comparisons $p \leq .001$). Furthermore, an increase of theta activity was observed in the left frontal side compared to the right one ($F[1,26] = 8.14$; $p < .001$; $\eta^2 = 0.34$) for positive gestures (Figure 3b).

4.1.3 Alpha band

About alpha, as revealed by ANOVA, a Gesture X ROI interaction effect ($F[6,150] = 11.09$; $p < .001$; $\eta^2 = 0.39$) was found. In particular, post-hoc comparisons revealed an increase of alpha brain activity (decrease of alpha power) in the frontal area for affective and social gestures compared to

informative gestures (for all post-hoc comparisons $p \leq .001$) and in the posterior (temporo-parietal) area for informative gestures compared to affective and social gestures (for all post-hoc comparisons $p \leq .001$) (Figure 3c).

4.1.4 Beta band

About the beta band, ANOVA reveals no significant effect.

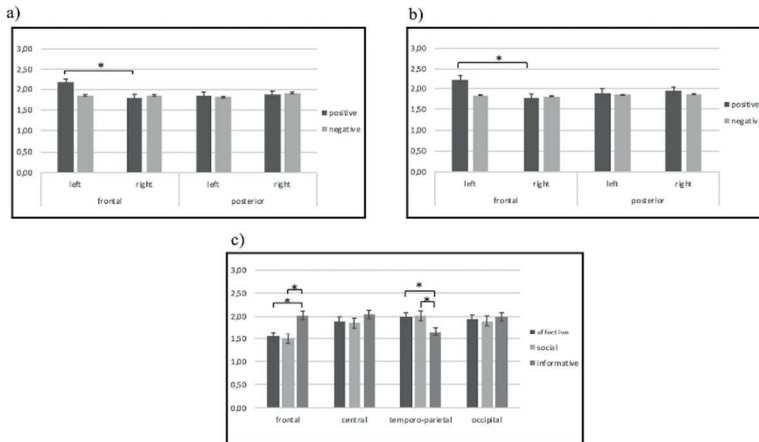


Figure 3. (a, b) Histogram of delta and theta brain activity for positive and negative gestures in frontal and posterior left and right side. (c) Histogram of alpha brain activity for affective, social and informative gestures in frontal, central, temporo-parietal and occipital area. For figures a,b,c bars represent ± 1 SE. Stars mark statistically significant ($p < .05$) pairwise comparisons

4.2 Intra-brain connectivity analysis

4.2.1 Delta band

For delta band, ANOVA revealed a significant Gesture X ROI interaction effect ($F[6,150] = 9.12$; $p < .001$; $\eta^2 = 0.35$). In particular, post-hoc comparisons showed an increase of intra-brain connectivity in frontal areas with respect to others for affective and social gestures and in posterior

(temporo-parietal) areas compared to others for informative ones (for all post-hoc comparisons $p \leq .001$) (Figure 4a, d).

4.2.2 Theta band

For theta band, ANOVA shows a significant Gesture X ROI interaction effect ($F[6,154] = 10.78$; $p < .001$; $\eta^2 = 0.37$). Particularly, post-hoc comparisons revealed an increase of intra-brain connectivity in frontal areas compared to other areas for affective and social gestures (for all post-hoc comparisons $p \leq .001$) (Figure 4b, e).

4.2.3 Alpha band

For alpha band, ANOVA shows a Gesture X ROI interaction effect ($F[6,150] = 10.11$; $p < .001$; $\eta^2 = 0.37$). In particular, post-hoc comparisons revealed an increase of intra-brain connectivity in frontal areas with respect to other areas for affective and social gestures, and in posterior areas with respect to others for informative gestures (for all post-hoc comparisons $p \leq .001$) (Figure 4c, f).

4.2.4 Beta band

About the beta band, ANOVA reveals no significant results.

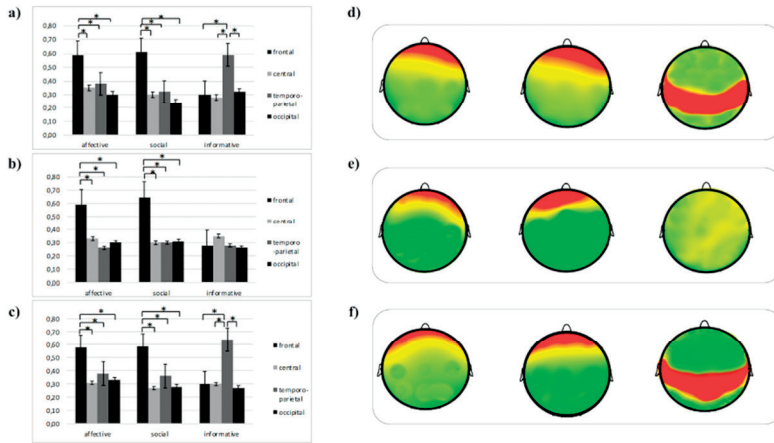


Figure 4. (a, b, c) Histogram of delta, theta and alpha intra-brain connectivity for affective, social and informative gestures in frontal, central, temporo-parietal and occipital areas. For figures a,b,c bars represent $\pm 1SE$. Stars mark statistically significant ($p < .05$) pairwise comparisons. (d, e, f) Delta, theta and alpha intra-brain connectivity (red area) representation, from left to right, for affective, social and informative gestures

5. DISCUSSION

The present study aimed to investigate the neural mechanisms that underlie the observation of positive and negative affective, social, and informative gestures in both the encoder and decoder.

Specifically, the brain responsiveness and intra-brain connectivity of both individuals were investigated in order to observe possible differences or similar neural mechanisms during the observation of different categories of gestures. In this regard, we expected to observe, firstly, a different modulation of low- and high-frequency bands activity and intra-brain connectivity concerning the category of gestures. Secondly, we expected to find a different cerebral frontal asymmetry according to gestures valence. Finally, we should reveal similar neural responses in frontal and parietal areas during the observation of gestures in both the encoder and decoder, due to the presence of similar mirroring mechanisms in response to the observation task.

Firstly, regarding the results of frequency band analyses, according to the

first hypothesis, specific neural responses have emerged during the observation of affective, social, and informative gestures.

In particular, an increase in brain responsiveness for alpha, delta, and theta activity was observed in the frontal region during the observation of affective and social gestures. Regarding this first evidence, the decrease in alpha power in the frontal region for the observation of affective and social gestures could be due to the implementation of sensorimotor processes that are associated with individuals' previous personal experiences with these types of gestures (Balconi & Fronda, 2020b; Mizelle et al., 2010; Puzzo et al., 2011; Quandt et al., 2012; Schneider et al., 2008). Indeed, affective and social gestures, given their more interactional and relational nature, can be more easily connected to the presence of previous personal affective and social experiences.

Instead, the increased activation of delta and theta bands in the frontal area during the observation of affective and social gestures could be related to individuals' abilities to respond emotionally to relational and social situations (Balconi & Bortolotti, 2012, 2013; Balconi & Caldiroli, 2011; Balconi et al., 2011, 2014; Balconi & Fronda 2020a,b; Rameson & Lieberman, 2009), through the use of affective and empathic processes (Balconi & Vanutelli, 2017; Balconi et al., 2015; Mu et al., 2008). Indeed, as revealed by previous research, the increased activation of the frontal area according to affective and social gestures highlighted the involvement of emotional, empathic and mental model processes (Balconi & Fronda, 2020a,b; Balconi & Fronda, 2021a,b; Balconi et al., 2014, 2020, 2021; Fronda & Balconi, 2020; Konvalinka et al., 2014; Rameson & Lieberman, 2009; Rosso et al., 2004). Frontal areas appear to be involved in the regulation of emotional expression and in the understanding of the emotional states of others (Balconi & Fronda, 2020b; Bressemer & Müller, 2017; Calbris, 2011; Fragonas et al., 2005; Fronda & Balconi, 2020; Kendon, 2017; Liotti & Mayberg, 2001), which are more implicated in this type of gesture. In particular, affective gestures are supported by specific frontal regions, such as the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex (DLPFC), which regulates processes of emotional sharing and mutual intentionality, prosocial, and empathic behavior as well as emotional attunement (Adolphs, 1999; Balconi & Canavesio, 2013, 2014; Balconi et al., 2020, 2021; Greene & Haidt, 2002; Fronda & Balconi, 2020).

Moreover, DLPFC is also involved in the management of the interpersonal relationship and theory of mind processes (Balconi et al., 2017a, 2020, 2021; Fronda & Balconi, 2020; Kalbe et al., 2010; Petrican & Schimmack, 2008).

As affective gestures, social ones result to be mediated by frontal areas, such as the superior frontal gyrus (SFG), that appear to be involved in self-

awareness processes and the monitoring of our and others behavior (Balconi et al., 2020, 2021; Crivelli & Balconi, 2017; Fronda & Balconi, 2020; Nakamura et al., 1998; Shima & Tanji, 2000).

Considering, instead, informative gesture observation, aimed at communicating information to direct interlocutor attention towards a specific object in the proximal or distal environment, an increase of alpha brain responsiveness (decrease of alpha power) was observed in temporal-parietal areas. This result could be due to the involvement of individuals' attentional processes (Balconi & Fronda 2020a,b; Posner et al., 1984; Rushworth et al., 2001) required by this category of gestures.

Secondly, considering gesture valence, according to the second hypothesis, a different frontal brain responsiveness for delta and theta bands, that are more involved in emotional processes underlying gesture perception (Balconi & Fronda 2020a,b, 2021a,b; Holle et al., 2012; Knyazev, 2007), has emerged during the observation of positive and negative gestures for all three gestures categories (social, affective, and informative).

This result is supported by the model of double neural signatures of Davidson's emotional experience (Tomarken et al., 1992), also supported by subsequent studies (Balconi & Fronda, 2020a,b, 2021a,b; Balconi et al. 2015, 2020, 2021; Fronda & Balconi, 2020; Wager et al., 2003), that have observed an increase of the left frontal activity for positive emotions and of the right frontal activity for negative ones.

This frontal asymmetry may depend on transient or stable personality traits and the approach or affective avoidance styles (Davidson, 1993; Davidson & Irwin, 1999; Tomarken et al., 1990, 1992; Wager et al., 2003).

Considering, instead, intra-brain connectivity results, according to our hypothesis, an increase of intra-brain connectivity for alpha, delta, and theta bands was observed in the frontal area during the observation of affective and social gestures. Furthermore, an increase of intra-brain connectivity of alpha and delta bands was also observed in temporal-parietal regions during the observation of informative gestures.

The increase of intra-brain connectivity in frontal regions for affective and social gestures and in temporal-parietal regions for informative ones highlights the presence of similar internal connectivity in both the encoder and decoder, who did not differ from each other in their intra-brain connectivity.

In general, the increase of intra-brain connectivity can be considered as advantageous at an evolutionary level because it implies the mediation of different sensorimotor systems and higher cognitive faculties supported by some frontal regions. In particular, the different modulation of cortical activity concerning the category of observed gestures may be due to the involvement of the mirroring processes, supported by specific brain regions, that are involved

in perceiving and observing gestures (Balconi & Fronda, 2020a; Rizzolatti et al., 2001; Rizzolatti & Sinigaglia, 2010).

Specifically, these mirroring mechanisms, supported mainly by the frontoparietal circuit, which regulate behavioral and social cognition (Rizzolatti & Sinigaglia, 2010), are implicated in the coupling between action observation and execution (Balconi & Fronda, 2020b; Rizzolatti et al., 1996, 2001), allowing the comprehension of the motor intention underlying actions (Gentilucci et al., 1983). Moreover, mirroring mechanisms, allowing the imitation and the understanding of the interlocutors behaviors (Balconi & Fronda 2020a,b, 2021a; Buccino et al., 2004; Iacoboni et al., 2005; Rizzolatti & Craighero, 2004; Rizzolatti & Luppino, 2001), lead individuals to simulate the others embodied experiences by activating the same neural mechanisms (Balconi & Fronda, 2020a,b, 2021a,b; Buccino et al., 2001; Keysers & Gazzola, 2014; Kohler et al., 2002; Rizzolatti & Sinigaglia, 2010), creating implicit coupling mechanisms between the individuals involved in the interaction (Balconi & Fronda, 2020a,b, 2021a,b; Rizzolatti & Sinigaglia, 2010; Shepherd et al., 2009).

In addition to the presence of mirror mechanisms, the increase of intra-brain connectivity in the frontal and parietal areas could be due to the involvement of these regions in the sensorimotor processes involved in gestures observation (Balconi & Fronda, 2020b; Rizzolatti & Fogassi, 2014; Rizzolatti & Sinigaglia, 2010). Indeed, as demonstrated by previous studies (Balconi et al., 2017; Kasess et al., 2008; Nguyen et al., 2014), frontal regions are more implicated in the processes of gestures imagination and intentionalization, while the parietal ones are more implicated in attentional processes of preparation of movements and imagination of motor actions (Balconi et al., 2017; Balconi & Fronda, 2020a,b; Balconi et al., 2020, 2021; Rushworth et al., 1997).

Finally, regarding this increase of intra-brain connectivity, it has emerged both in the encoder and the decoder underlying how gestures observation represents a common mechanism, regardless of just observation or production.

This result highlights the presence of possible mirroring mechanisms both in the encoder and the decoder, which almost activate specific localized processes in some brain areas during the observation of the different gesture types.

Indeed, as shown by previous studies (Balconi & Fronda, 2020b; Fronda & Balconi, 2020; Holle et al., 2008), the activation of similar brain patterns that support gestures observation occurs during the actions of coding and decoding.

The results of the present study, therefore, show that gestures observation represents a common action among interacting individuals, as evidenced both

by the increase of brain responsiveness and intra-brain connectivity in the same brain areas both in the encoder and in the decoder, that underline the presence of mirror, resonant and common mechanisms. These processes turn out to be the basis of social processes, such as empathy (Carr et al., 2003; Molnar-Szakacs et al., 2007), intentionality comprehension and communicative exchanges (Iacoboni et al., 2005; Molnar-Szakacs et al., 2007).

However, despite the potential of this study, some limitations that could be implemented in future studies can be highlighted, such as the sample size, which could be implemented; and a possible consideration about the composition of dyads of different sex, to evaluate any possible differences in individuals' brain responsiveness and intra-brain connectivity. In addition, the use of only EEG to investigate cortical activity could be implemented using a peripheral activity detection tool, as biofeedback. Finally following studies could consider the use of other types of specific gestures, not only affective, social and informative ones.

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