Correlated individual differences suggest a common mechanism underlying metacognition in visual perception and visual short-term memory

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Abstract

Adaptive behavior depends on the ability to accurately introspect about one's own performance. Whether this metacognitive ability is supported by the same mechanisms across different tasks is an open question that has thus far been investigated with a focus on correlating metacognitive accuracy between perceptual and long-term memory paradigms. Here, we investigated the relationship between metacognition of visual perception and metacognition of visual short-term memory (VSTM), a cognitive function thought to be more intimately related to visual processing. Across two experiments that required subjects to estimate the perceived or remembered orientation of a grating stimulus and rate their confidence, we observed strong positive correlations between individual differences in metacognitive accuracy between the two tasks. This relationship was not accounted for by individual differences in task performance or average confidence, and was present across two different metrics of metacognition and in both experiments. In contrast to previous results comparing perception and long-term memory, which have largely provided evidence for domain-specific metacognitive processes, the current findings suggest that metacognition of visual perception and VSTM is supported by a domain-general metacognitive architecture.

Introduction

When humans make decisions they are capable of estimating the likelihood that their decision was accurate. This introspective ability falls under a class of cognitive processes known as metacognition because it entails cognizing about the quality of a decision-making process (1). Intuitively, an individual has high metacognitive accuracy if their estimate of the accuracy of their decision (e.g., as expressed by a confidence rating) corresponds well with the actual accuracy of their decision (2). Because decisions can be made on the basis of information from a plethora of sources—for example, deciding on the basis of current sensory input versus deciding on the basis of information culled from long-term memory—an outstanding question is whether metacognitive processes are domain-general or domain-specific (3). A domain-general metacognitive monitoring process would be expected to evaluate the accuracy of decisions made from both perceptual inputs as well as those based on memory. In contrast, a domain-specific metacognitive system would use independent neural resources or computations to estimate the quality of memory- versus perception-based judgments, for example.

Recent work on this topic has focused on correlating individual differences in metacognition during perception and long-term memory and has resulted in mixed findings. Several studies have reported non-significant relationships between individual's metacognitive ability in a perceptual task and their metacognitive ability in a long-term memory task (4–6), suggesting domain-specific metacognition. However, another experiment using similar tasks did find a reliable positive correlation between metacognitive abilities in both domains (7), and other work has shown correlated metacognitive performance across different perceptual tasks (8), suggesting some shared underlying resources. A number of the above-mentioned studies, however, have also reported that structural and function brain imaging data from distinct regions correlated with metacognitive abilities for the distinct tasks, reinforcing domain-specificity at the neural level (4,5,7). Additional evidence for domain-specificity between perception and long-term memory has come from a recent study of patients with lesions to anterior portions of prefrontal cortex. These patients showed a selective deficit it visual perceptual metacognition, but not memory metacognition for a recently studied word list (9).

A lack of cross-task correlation in metacognition may sometimes be difficult to interpret because this could result from procedural differences between tasks not necessarily related to the cognitive construct under investigation (e.g., the use of different stimuli in the perception versus memory task). Furthermore, perception and long-term memory are themselves quite distinct cognitive functions (although they can certainly interact in some situations, e.g., (10)), and an underexplored question is whether perceptual metacognition relates to metacognition for other cognitive functions more closely related to perception. Across two experiments, we examined whether metacognition in visual perceptual judgments is related to metacognition for visual short-term memory (VSTM) judgments using tasks that differ only in the requirement for memory storage over a short delay. Because visual perception and VSTM has been hypothesized to rely on shared mechanisms and neural representations (11–14), we might anticipate that metacognition in these domains is also based on some shared resource, leading to positively correlated individual differences in metacognition across tasks.

Methods

Participants. Forty subjects (twenty in Experiment 1: mean age = 21 years, *SD* = 1.67, 10 female, and twenty in Experiment 2: mean age = 20.6 years, *SD* = 2.01, 14 female) from the University of Wisconsin-Madison community participated in these experiments and received monetary compensation. All subjects provided written consent, reported normal or corrected-to-normal visual acuity and color vision, and were naive to the hypothesis of the experiment. The University of Wisconsin-Madison Institutional Review Board approved the study.

Stimuli. Target stimuli were identical for both experiments and consisted of sinusoidal luminance gratings embedded in random dot noise presented within a central circular aperture (see Figure 1A). Gratings subtended 2 degrees of visual angle (DVA), had a spatial frequency of 1.5 cycles/DVA and a phase of zero. Fixation (a light gray point, 0.08 DVA) was centered on the screen and was dimmed slightly to indicate trial start (see Figure 1A). Noise consisted of black and white pixels generated randomly on each trial. The contrast of the grating was determined for each subject by an adaptive staircase procedure prior to the main tasks. On a random half of the trials the contrast of both the signal and the noise was halved. This was not expected to impact orientation estimation performance because the signal-to-noise ratio of the stimulus was unchanged (15), but this manipulation was not further explored here. Stimuli were presented on an iMac computer screen (52 cm wide × 32.5 cm tall; 1920 × 1200 resolution; 60 Hz refresh rate). Subjects viewed the screen from a chin rest at a distance of 62 cm. Stimuli were generated and presented using the MGL toolbox (http://gru.stanford.edu) running in MATLAB 2015b (MathWorks, Natick, MA, USA).

Staircase procedure. To minimize performance differences across subjects, both experiments began with 100 trials of 1-up, 3-down adaptive staircase procedure controlled by the PEST algorithm (16), which classified responses as correct or incorrect depending on whether they were within 25 degrees of a trial's true orientation. Procedurally, the staircase task was identical to the perceptual task (described below), with the exception of staircasing stimulus contrast.

Perceptual task. To probe each individual's perceptual metacognitive abilities, we employed an orientation estimation task (17). On each trial, a target grating was presented centrally for 33 ms with a randomly determined orientation between 1-180^{o}, followed shortly (600 ms) by a highly visible probe grating without noise, whose orientation could be rotated via mouse movement. This short interval between the target and probe was necessary to ensure that the probe had no visual masking effect. Subjects were instructed to match the perceived orientation as closely as possible. Subjects pressed the spacebar to input their orientation response and then used number keys 1-4 to provide a confidence rating. Because performance in this task varies continuously (as opposed to a binary correct/incorrect outcome) we instructed subjects to use the confidence scale to indicate how close they think they came to the true orientation using the scale labels 1 = "complete guess" and 4 = "very close". These perceptual task parameters were the same for both experiments. See Figure 1A for complete trial timings.

VSTM task. To probe metacognitive abilities for VSTM, we introduced a delay period between the target and the response probe. In Experiment 1, the delay period was fixed at 7 seconds and in Experiment 2 it was randomly sampled from the set: 3.45, 6.30, 9.15, or 12.00 seconds. The stimuli and all other task events were identical to the perceptual task in order to minimize any differences between tasks that are unrelated to the cognitive manipulation of interest

Procedure. For Experiment 1, perceptual and working memory tasks were performed in separate blocks. Following the staircase, each subject completed one block of 120 trials of the perceptual task, followed by three blocks of 60 trials each of the VSTM task, followed by another block of the perceptual task. This resulted in a total of 240 perceptual trials and 180 VSTM trials per subject, completed in a single 1.5 hour session. Experiment 2 differed in that perceptual and VSTM trials were intermixed within blocks and randomly determined with equal probability to be either a perceptual trial or one of the four delay periods (between 3.45 - 12 seconds) of the VSTM task. Intermixing perception and VSTM trials further minimized procedural differences between tasks by eliminating any task-related expecations (since subjects did not know which type of trial would come next) and by removing temporal delays between task performance. Each subject completed 300 trials, seperated into 5 blocks, resulting in an average (± SD) of 55.5 (6.4) perceptual trials and 59 (8.0) trials of each delay period of the VSTM task. Total task time was ~1.5 hours.

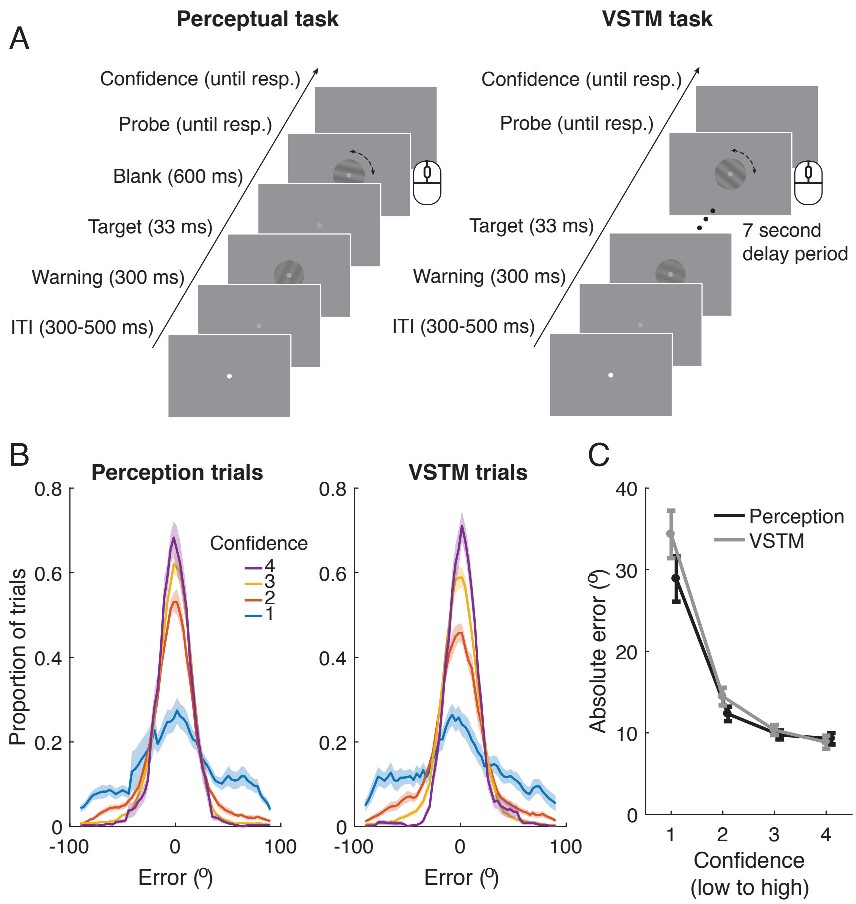

Figure 1. *Orientation estimation tasks and confidence-error relationships for Experiment 1. (A) On each trial of the perception and VSTM task, subjects moved a computer mouse to match the perceived or remembered orientation as closely as possible and then provided a confidence rating on a 1-4 scale to indicate how close they thought they came to the true orientation where 1 = "complete guess" and 4 = "very close". The tasks differed only by the addition of a 7 second delay period for the VSTM task. (B) Distributions of responses relative to the true orientation (i.e., error) show a clear scaling with confidence ratings, suggesting that subjective ratings track objective performance at the group level. (C) Median absolute error scales with confidence and VSTM trials produced overall greater error, indicating that representations became noisier when held in VSTM. ITI: inter-trial interval. Shaded bands and error bars denote ± 1 SEM.*

Quantifying metacognition. Task performance is measured as error (in degrees) between the subject's response and the true orientation on each trial (see Figure 1B). To relate this continuously varying performance metric to subjective confidence ratings we computed correlations between each trials' absolute error and confidence rating, which indicate how well confidence tracks performance. Error should decrease with increasing confidence so a subject with good metacognition would have a stronger negative correlation between confidence and error than a subject with poor metacognition. Although intuitive, and used elsewhere (18,19), this metric is potentially influenced by factors not necessarily related to metacognitive accuracy per se, such as task difficulty and biases in confidence scale use (e.g., under or overconfidence; (20). Although we used a staircase procedure to match difficulty, there was still considerable variability across subjects in median absolute error in both Experiment 1 (range: 8 - 16.5^{o}) and Experiment 2 (range: 6.9 – 23.3^{o}). A recently introduced measure called meta-d'/d' can correct for these influences (2), however, meta-d'/d' has been developed only for tasks with discreet outcomes amenable to signal detection theory analysis (e.g., hits, misses) and cannot be applied to the continuous estimations tasks we employed. In order to control for these influences when testing our primary hypothesis about the relationship between perceptual and VSTM metacognition, we ran two additional multiple regression models that included covariates for average and task-specific error and confidence (see *Statistics* below). In the case of models with multiple predictors, the relationship between perceptual and memory metacognition was visualized (Figure 2 and 4) using added variable plots (MATLAB function *plotAdded.m*), which use the Frisch–Waugh–Lovell theorem to partial out the effects of other predictors in the model, revealing the effect of a single predictor while all other predictors are held constant. Predictor R^2 for these models was computed as the sum of squares for the perceptual metacognition predictor divided by the total sum of squares for all other predictors and error.

Additionally, we verified that the results of this analysis were robust to our particular metric of metacognition by repeating all analyses using the non-parametric area under the type 2 receiver operating characteristics curve (A_{ROC}; (21–23) as our measure of metacognitive accuracy. This measure is obtained by taking the area under the curve formed by plotting the type 2 false alarm rate by the type 2 hit rate at different type 2 criteria. A type 2 false alarm is an incorrect but high confidence trial and type 2 hit is a correct and high confidence trial and the number of confidence criteria is the number of ratings on the scale minus 1. At values of 0.5, this metric indicates that confidence ratings do not discriminate between correct and incorrect trials and values of 1 indicate perfect discriminability. A_{ROC} was computed using the method outlined in (21). Because this metric requires binarizing the data into correct and incorrect responses, we defined thresholds for each subject based on the 75th percentile of their response error distributions such that a trial with error larger than this threshold was considered incorrect. This analytically set performance at 75% for each subject, equating accuracy for this analysis. Using a common threshold of 25 degrees for each subject did not change the statistical significance of any analyses reported with this metric. Prior to any analysis, trials with response times below 200 milliseconds or above the 95th percentile of the distribution of response times across all subjects were excluded. The same trial exclusion procedure was applied to both experiments.

Statistics. We used linear regression to predict individual differences in VSTM metacognition from variation in perceptual metacognition scores (Figures 2 and 4). In a first, "basic model", we considered only these two variables. Then, to control for individual differences in task performance and confidence ratings, we ran two additional regression models. One included each subject's mean error and mean confidence as covariates (3 predictors in total) and the other included task-specific confidence and error as covariates (i.e., mean perceptual error and confidence and mean VSTM error and confidence; 5 predictors in total). These three models were run for each metric of metacognition (r values and A_{ROC}; see above) and for both experiments. To test for linear effects of confidence on error (Figures 1C and 3D) we regressed single-trial confidence ratings on absolute error for each subject and task and tested the resulting slopes against zero at the group level using a t-test. To test for performance differences between tasks we compared median absolute error between the perception and VSTM task with a paired t-test. We additionally tested for a linear effect of delay period duration in Experiment 2 (Figure 3B) by fitting slopes to each subject's single-trial absolute error by delay period data and testing these slopes against zero at the group level with a t-test. All tests were two-tailed.

Results

Experiment 1. Distributions of response error as a function of confidence are show in Figure 1B. Absolute error significantly decreased with increasing confidence for both the perceptual task ($t(19) = -13.48$, $p < 0.0001$) and the VSTM task ($t(19) = -14.88$, $p < 0.0001$), indicating that subject's confidence reasonably reflected their task performance at the group level (Figure 1C). Error was also significantly greater in the VSTM task as compared to the perceptual task ($t(19) = -2.10$, $p = 0.049$), reflecting an expected degradation of orientation information when the task required short-term memory maintenance.

Central to our hypothesis, we found a robust positive relationship across individuals between perceptual metacognition and VSTM metacognition (Figure 2). This relationship was observed when using confidence-error correlations as the measure of metacognition (slope = 0.47, t = 2.39, predictor $R^2 = 0.24$, $p = 0.027$; Figure 2A) and, importantly, was still present after controlling for average confidence and error (slope = 0.44, t = 2.24, predictor $R^2 = 0.22$, p =

0.039) and in the model controlling for task-specific confidence and error (slope = 0.52, t = 2.42, predictor $R^2 = 0.25$, p = 0.029). All covariate predictors in both control models were not statistically significant (ps > 0.27). These results indicate that, although the confidence-error correlation may be influenced by task performance and confidence biases, these factors did not account for the across-subjects correlation between perceptual and VSTM metacognition.

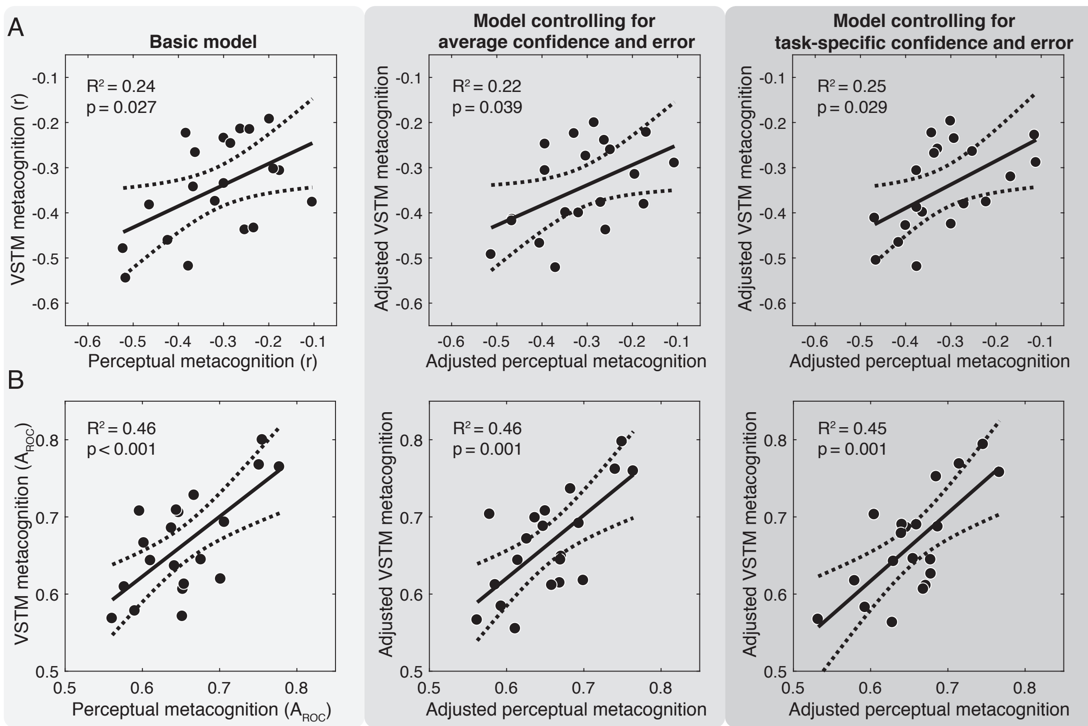

Figure 2. *Positive relationship between perceptual and VSTM metacognition in Experiment 1. (A) Cross-task regression using confidence-error correlations as the metric of metacognition. Increasingly complex regression models controlling for task performance and confidence shown from left to right (see Methods). (B) Same models as in A, but using the area under the type 2 ROC curve (A_{ROC}) as a measure of metacognitive performance. Dashed lines denoted 95% confidence intervals on the linear fit. Black points are individual subjects.*

The same relationship was observed when using A_{ROC} as the metric of metacognition (Figure 2B). With the basic model, perceptual metacognition significantly predicted VSTM metacognition (slope = 0.77, t = 3.96, predictor $R^2 = 0.46$, p = 0.0009). This relationship held when controlling for average confidence and error (slope = 0.82, t = 3.78, predictor R^2 = 0.46, p = 0.0016) and when controlling for task-specific confidence and error (slope = 0.88, t = 3.85, predictor R^2 = 0.45, p = 0.0017). As before, all other covariate predictors across both control models were non-significant (ps > 0.26). These results indicate that the relationship observed between perceptual and VSTM metacognition was independent of the particular metric used and was not accounted for by correlated individual differences in task performance or average.

Experiment 2. This experiment served to replicate the cross-task correlation observed in Experiment 1 while further minimizing procedural differences between tasks by intermixing perceptual and VSTM trials of differing delays (Figure 3A). Error increased monotonically with delay duration ($t(19)$ =   2.85, p = 0.010. Figure 3B), and perception trials had lower error than VSTM trials, collapsing across delays ($t(19)$ = 3.33, p = 0.003), indicating the expected loss of information in VSTM relative to perception. As in Experiment 1, error decreased with increasing confidence during both perception ($t(19)$ = -7.56, p < 0.0001) and VSTM trials ($t(19)$ = -8.99, p < 0.0001), indicating that confidence reliably tracked performance at the group level (Figure 3C & 3D).

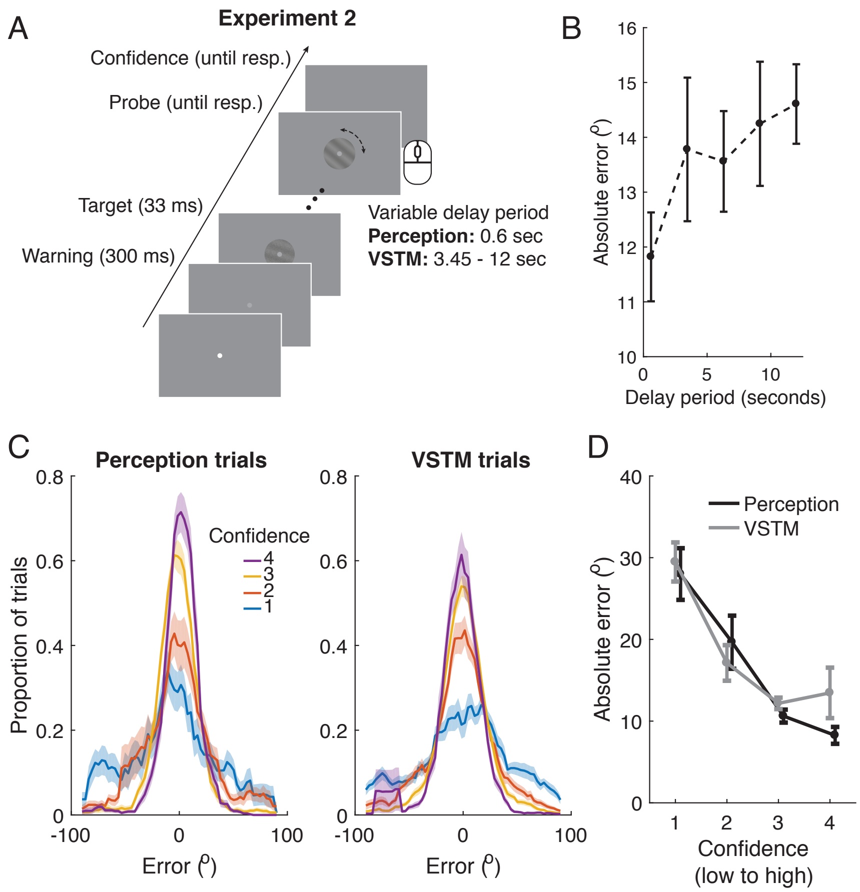

Figure 3. *Task and behavior for Experiment 2. (A) Perceptual trials (delay 0.6 seconds) and VSTM trials (delay between 3.45 and 12 seconds) were intermixed within blocks to minimize procedural differences between tasks. (B) Error increased with increasing delay length, indicating a loss of information when the orientation needed to be maintained in VSTM. (C) Response error distributions show a clear scaling with confidence. (D) Error decreased as confidence increased in both perceptual and VSTM trials. Shaded bands and error bars indicate ± 1 SEM.*

Importantly, we replicated the positive relationship between perceptual and VSTM metacognition with quantitatively better model fits in a new set of subjects. Using confidence-error correlations (Figure 4A) perceptual metacognition robustly predicted VSTM metacognition in the one-predictor basic model (slope = 0.59, t = 4.64 predictor R^2 = 0.54, p = 0.0002), the three-predictor model controlling for average confidence and error (slope = 0.57, t = 4.27, predictor R^2 = 0.52, p = 0.0005), and in the five-predictor model controlling for task-specific confidence and error (slope = 0.55, t = 3.72, predictor R^2 = 0.49, p = 0.002. All covariate predictors in both control models were non-significant (ps > 0.44). This effect was also observed when using A_{ROC} as the metric of metacognition for the basic model (slope = 0.53, t = 3.88, predictor R^2 = 0.45, p = 0.0011), the three-predictor model (slope = 0.52, t = 3.58, predictor R^2 = 0.44, p = 0.002), and the five-predictor model (slope = 0.54, t = 3.43, predictor R^2 = 0.44, p = 0.004). All covariates in both control models were non-significant (ps > 0.52).

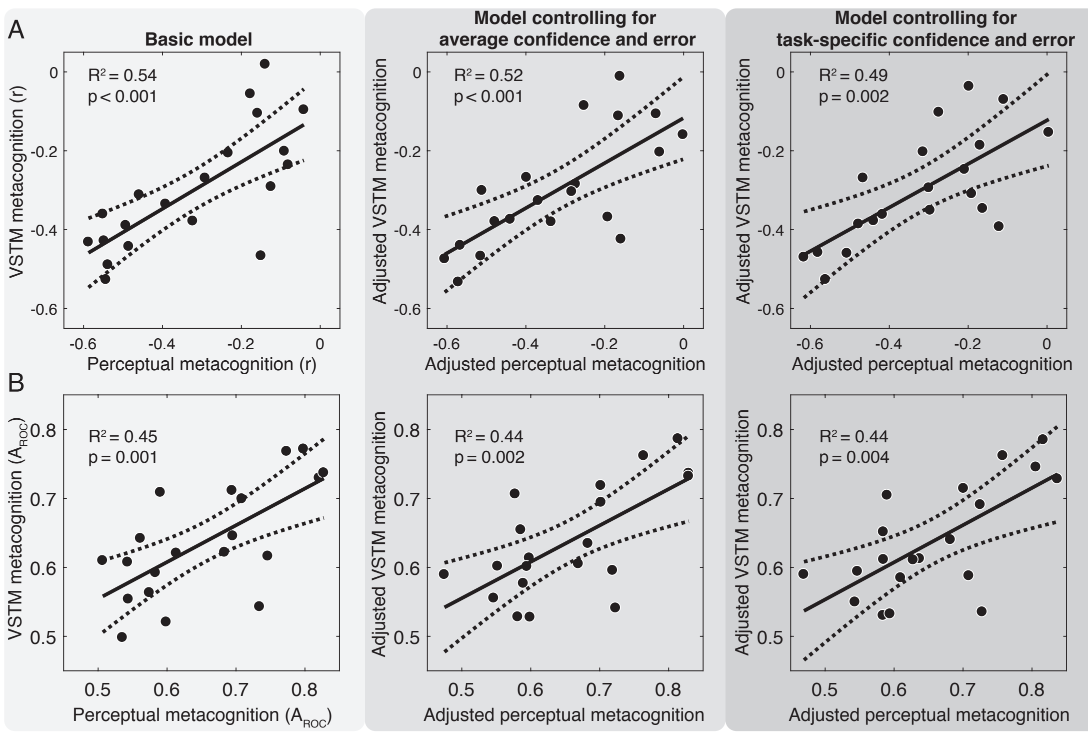

Figure 4. *Replication of the positive relationship between perceptual and VSTM metacognition in Experiment 2. (A) Same regression models as in Figure 2, indicating the cross-task relationship using confidence-error correlations as the metric of metacognition. (B) Same as in A, but with A_{ROC} as the metric of metacognition. Dashed lines denoted 95% confidence intervals on the linear fit.*

Discussion

Metacognition is an important aspect of decision-making (24,25), learning (26), development (27), and perhaps certain aspects of conscious experience (28,29), and can be compromised in psychiatric disorders (30). It is currently unclear whether an individual with good metacognitive ability in one domain also has good metacognition in other domains. In Experiment 1, we found that individuals with more accurate metacognition in perceptual judgments also showed more accurate metacognition in a VSTM task requiring stimulus maintenance over a 7 second delay period. This relationship was present when using two different measures of metacognitive performance and regression models controlling for task performance and mean confidence revealed that this effect was not driven by correlated individual differences in task performance or confidence biases. We then replicated these findings in Experiment 2 with a new set of subjects using a task that intermixed perceptual and VSTM trial types within blocks. Intermixing trial types in Experiment 2 more than doubled the proportion of variance in VSTM metacognition explained by perceptual metacognition in the models using error-confidence correlations relative to Experiment 1 when trial types were blocked (mean increase in $R^2 = 0.28$, a factor of 2.2), highlighting the importance of minimizing procedural differences between tasks. A comparable increase across experiments was not seen, however, when using the AUC metric, which already showed a very large effect size in both experiments and across all models (mean $R^2 = 0.45$, Cohen's $d = 1.81$). Taken together, these results provide the first evidence in humans for a medium-to-high positive correlation between an individual's metacognitive abilities in perception and VSTM.

The present results contrast with recent experiments examining the relationship between metacognition of visual perception and long-term memory, which have typically observed no correlation (4–6; but see 7). We reason that, in contrast to long-term memory, VSTM is thought to rely on the same neural representations that support perception (11–14), and this may underlie the cross-task correlation in metacognitive performance. This explanation follows naturally from "first-order" models of metacognition according to which confidence and task performance are driven by the same internal representation of stimulus evidence (31–34). For example, in signal detection theoretic models, the absolute distance of the decision variable from the decision criterion is a proxy for confidence (35,36). Thus, if perception and VSTM were supported by the same internal representation of the stimulus, then the computation of confidence across the two tasks would also be based on the same representations, leading to correlated behavior. "Second-order" models of metacognition, in contrast, posit an architecture with a secondary confidence read-out process, which may be influenced by additional sources of noise (37) or other signals not directly related to the stimulus, such as action-related states (38,39), cortical excitability (40), or arousal (41). The present findings are also compatible with second-order models of metacognition, although several possible relationships between first- and second-order processes could explain our findings. Shared first-order (sensory) representations across tasks might be enough for produce a behavioral correlation despite separate second-order readout mechanisms. Alternatively, both first- and second-order processes may be shared across tasks, or only the second-order process shared, though this latter possibility is unlikely given existing neural evidence for shared representations in visual regions across perception and VSTM (14,42,43).

Although the present findings are consistent with a domain-general model of metacognition for perception and VSTM, correlations at the behavioral level raise further questions about what specific aspects of metacognitive processing are shared. For example if one's ability to learn stable confidence criteria over time improves to metacognitive accuracy (34), then metacognitive abilities may be high across domains for an individual with superior learning abilities. However, this need not imply that the underlying neural substrate responsible for computing the appropriate levels of confidence is itself domain-general. Similarly, recent work has highlighted specific factors beyond stimulus evidence that modulate confidence, leading to dissociations of confidence and task performance within an individual (15,44,45). For example, spontaneous trial-to-trial fluctuations in oscillatory neural activity in the alpha-band (8-13 Hz), which are thought to reflect visual cortical excitability (46,47), have been shown to bias confidence ratings, but not objective performance in a visual discrimination task (40). Perhaps a subject who is less susceptible to such influences from sources not directly related to the difficulty of stimulus discrimination would show better metacognition across different domains. Future work examining neural correlates of metacognitive performance across different domains may contribute in a substantive way to this issue. As an example, McCurdy and colleagues (7) observed a positive correlation between metacognition of perception and recollection memory at the behavioral level, but found distinct (as well as overlapping) neural structures whose gray matter volume related to metacognitive performance in the different tasks. This suggests that only a portion of the processing stages or computations involved in generating confidence need be shared across tasks in order to produce a behavioral correlation.

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