

Research in social cognition, like that in most sciences, is becoming increasingly collaborative. As research becomes more complex and the research process requires more specialised expertise, collaboration provides often-essential skills and knowledge for conducting research. The central objective of this network is to create a platform that facilitates European research collaboration in the field of social cognition and leads to the formulation of cutting edge collaborative European research programmes.

Increased collaboration will provide us with a unique opportunity to pool our intellectual resources and gain

European Social Cognition Network (ESCON)

An ESF scientific programme



an added scientific value that could not be achieved at a national level. Europe has many distinguished social cognition researchers, however, this expertise is distributed across Europe. Geographical distance and the expenses associated with securing travelling funds to participate in expert exchanges bring considerable cost to developing joint research programmes. Thus, one of the aims of the proposed programme is to facilitate existing contacts and encourage new initiatives, especially those that help to contribute to the development of collaborative research projects that will advance European research in social cognition to achieve a leading international position.

In 1999, 2000, and 2001 three transfer of knowledge conferences were held in the Netherlands, Germany and Belgium. The European Social Cognition Network is the result of these initiatives. The preliminary goal was to organise three conferences to examine the effectiveness of a new forum for knowledge transfer regarding new scientific advances among senior scientists, and in particular facilitate the training of the new generation of scientists in the field (the PhD students). The successful organisation of these conferences has shown that it is possible to have an active and involved European network among social cognition researchers and provided evidence that it is possible to lay the foundations of a more formal, systematic and enduring institution. The European Social Cognition Network aims to continue to support researchers to remain at the cutting edge of social cognition research. Currently, the European Social Cognition Network has 15 member countries across Europe.



The European Science Foundation acts as a catalyst for the development of science by bringing together leading scientists and funding agencies to debate, plan and implement pan-European initiatives.

Introduction

The field

Cognition has constituted a central preoccupation in human intellectual history. This is not surprising given that cognition constitutes a distinctive feature of *Homo sapiens*. The questions ‘What is knowledge?’ and ‘How is knowledge acquired and used?’ have been at the centre of human inquiry from time immemorial. The form of these questions has varied throughout human history depending on the prevailing paradigms within which they were raised, may these be religious, philosophical or scientific. The last 50 years has seen concerted multidisciplinary efforts (for example, psychology, psycho-linguistics, neurosciences, computer sciences, anthropology, philosophy) that have dramatically changed the ways of conceptualising how knowledge is acquired, processed and used. Characteristically, these developments have led to a *computational* or an *information-processing* viewpoint. This handle on cognition has shaped the development of robust, sophisticated, and cumulative bodies of theory concerning such issues as the nature of mental representations, the impact of accessible representations on judgments, and the factors affecting people’s use of simple heuristic cues versus more systematic processing.

Unfortunately, these insights have largely neglected the fact that cognition is for action and adaptation rather than merely computation. This is a view that has often been overlooked although it dates back to William James, Lev Vygotsky, Sir Frederic Bartlett, among others. The evolution of cognition research has taken place against a background of finding solutions to problems arising in natural or cultural contexts. These solutions are of a *social* origin. The function of cognition is therefore the control of socially adaptive action. Because of the importance of adaptation to specific and varying situations, cognition and action constitute the emergent outcome of dynamic processes of interaction between an agent and an environment. The examination of cognition can therefore *not* be regarded as a phenomenon that is located at an intra-individual level alone (that is, located in an individual or a brain). Cognition is about the control of adaptive action at a social or interpersonal level. This is why social cognition occupies a central position in the development of the field of cognition and its science as a whole.

One of the major challenges of understanding cognition is discovering how knowledge is acquired, stored and used across different social and cultural contexts. Indeed, the ‘situation’ in which cognition takes place is, almost always, a social situation defined by an individual’s group memberships, personal relationships and communicative purposes. Broadly, the field of social cognition investigates the ways people perceive, interact with, and influence each other, studying specific topics such as person perception, group prejudice and stereotyping, personal relationships, group processes, persuasion and social influence.

Social cognition in Europe

Social cognition in Europe is an active and vibrant research field. It would not be an exaggeration to say that European social cognition researchers have made cutting edge contributions to the field,

setting the highest standards in the scientific community. There are a substantial number of top-quality researchers across a number of different countries in Europe. Nevertheless, no single European country, on its own, is able to offer the full expertise needed to further advance the field and in particular to offer the broad training that is essential for the incoming generation of researchers. Indeed, there are isolated institutional developments in some countries that have advanced solutions to the problem of scientific networking and training at a local level, but the international character of research and the distribution of expertise and knowledge across the diverse European countries need the establishment a European scientific network. This would not only facilitate the development of joint research projects between researchers in the different European countries, but also advance graduate training and facilitate research networking of young scholars at an early point in their careers. Essentially, the function of such a scientific network is the transfer of knowledge, which is crucial to enhance the quality of research in general. Moreover, such transfer of knowledge is particularly important for specific scientific communities in Europe where access to advances made elsewhere is more limited and where the local training facilities and expertise are scarce or simply inadequate.

Aims and objectives

The central objective of ESCON is to create a platform that facilitates European research collaboration in the field of social cognition that will lead to the formulation of cutting edge collaborative research programmes. To this end, the programme is designed to achieve the following objectives:

- (a) to facilitate the development of joint scientific projects; and
- (2) to enhance graduate student training.

Facilitating the development of joint scientific research programmes by social cognition workers in different European countries.

While Europe has many distinguished social cognition researchers, this expertise is distributed across its member countries. By facilitating existing contact and new initiatives this network aims to further collaboration and joint research programmes. This would enable greater forums for cutting edge research and provide a network that is highly accessible for graduate students, thus allowing increased collaboration between junior and senior researchers within the field.

Moreover, the development of joint research programmes would support the research community in maintaining and advancing a qualified position among the international leaders in the domain of the social cognition. Therefore, one of the important goals is to establish the grounds for possible joint research applications (for example, EUROCORES). A significant development that is likely to emerge from such joint research projects is the consolidation of the ESCON and the facilitation of intraEuropean mobility between senior and junior scholars. The objective of facilitating expert meetings for the development of joint scientific programmes also serves the graduate training objective, since these experts will be the people who will be able to develop a joint graduate training curriculum.

Enhancing graduate training and facilitating the development of a joint social cognition curriculum that would be a central educational platform within the emerging structure of graduate training (MA and PhD level) within Europe.

As is well known, the European university systems are working towards a BA/MA structure that is being gradually introduced across Europe. Currently,

graduate training in Europe builds on the substantial expertise in Europe. Nevertheless, such expertise both in research and research training is not equally available at the same level across European universities. Moreover, access to available research training facilities varies considerably within and between these countries. Finally, some European countries do not even have any organised or coordinated training programme in the first place, in part because of the nature of their university systems.

The objective is to bundle the expertise in the field of social cognition in order to develop a general curriculum for social cognition research that can be made available across European universities where social psychology is being taught. The goal of this initiative is to develop a platform that would give the highest level of theoretical and methodological training to graduate students so that an internationally top-level graduate programme can be made available. One can achieve this by pooling the expertise that is distributed across Europe for training purposes and making it available across Europe and even internationally. To this end we intend to develop the graduate training component by interfacing a series of activities that will contribute to a strengthening of the research training of graduates in social cognition research across Europe.

Three key instruments are designed to meet these objectives.

- Transfer of knowledge conferences
- Expert meetings
- Internet-based research training programme

Programme activities

Five annual transfer of knowledge conferences with a maximum of 100 participants are planned. These conferences will be held in September each year and will be arranged by a local organising committee in the country

where the conference will be held.

Participation is open to all researchers working in the field of social cognition.

Two expert meetings of 10 to 12 experts are planned annually. The composition of these meetings will be driven by considerations of enhancing the possibility of joint research proposals as well as the development of Internet-based courses.

Transfer of knowledge conferences

The transfer of knowledge conferences provide a regular platform for the transfer of knowledge and the training, promotion and networking of PhD students in the field of social cognition. These conferences are a European forum where both junior and senior researchers present the latest research developments in the field and receive feedback from senior scholars in their respective fields of specialisation. Thus, transfer of knowledge conferences fulfil an important training and networking function for the new generation of social cognition researchers. Young scholars have the opportunity to meet senior researchers from across the field and are able to develop their own research networks at the forefront of new research initiatives.

Expert meetings

The expert meetings are short (4 to 5-day) biannual workshops that bring up to 12 senior researchers together at a time. The composition of such expert meetings will be carefully prepared to maximise *complementarity of expertise, compatibility of research fields, and diversity of composition* (international). The main objective is to ensure that senior researchers are drawn from diverse *interdisciplinary* (anthropology, biology, cognitive science, ethology, law, neuroscience, etc.) and/or *intradisciplinary* (cognitive psychology, developmental psychology, psycholinguistics, etc.) backgrounds with a view to facilitating the development of novel theoretical and empirical syntheses that will lead to new, groundbreaking research.

The purpose of these meetings is twofold. First, these expert meetings are designed to facilitate joint European research programmes with an added value that could not be achieved locally. The development of joint research ventures is also critical in establishing a European infrastructure that will allow European mobility between senior and junior researchers. Second, these workshops would help to prepare and develop the different graduate training programmes and assess the diverse needs that will vary as a function of the type of university communities.

Graduate research training

The expert group meetings are simultaneously designed to develop the outline of an *Internet-based training programme in theory and methods of social cognition*. The development of such a training resource would allow the substantial European expertise in the field of social cognition to be available for training purposes at the same level across all European universities. The

idea is to develop a set of interactive courses over the five-year period that would be accessible by all European universities. Such an Internet-based interactive teaching package could then become an integral part of any graduate curriculum within the emerging MA and PhD programmes for those institutions where such education structures are to be implemented. Indeed, the advantage of this facility is that it would be accessible by any individual or group who would like to subscribe to the Internet package. This facility would be the least expensive form of an internationally accessible teaching package that prospective tutors could choose from depending on the respective curriculum needs in their universities.

This set of interrelated instruments is also designed to lead to a network that could be run independently within a period of five years.

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