

EUROPEAN
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EUROCORES Programme

EuroUnderstanding

**Understanding and Misunderstanding:
Cognition, Communication and Culture**



EUROCORES Programme

European Collaborative Research

It almost goes without saying that escalating miscommunications and misunderstandings – between individuals, groups, cultures or nations – lie at the heart of many of the current social conflicts that affect individuals and societies all around the globe. This gives a strong sense of urgency to the question of how understanding and misunderstanding is generated.

To understand the social generation of understanding and misunderstandings, we need to analyse the conditions for interpersonal, intra-group and intergroup understanding. Examples include the coordination of joint action, the exchange of information and the sharing of experiences, meanings and values. These issues are widely investigated across academic traditions and disciplines, at vastly differing levels of analysis: from neural processes (within an individual brain) all the way to cultural processes (across societies). What is needed for a comprehensive explanatory account of these phenomena is the integration of the different levels of analyses in a non-reductionist framework.

The EUROCORES Programme Understanding and Misunderstanding: Cognition, Communication and Culture (EuroUnderstanding) is based on the conviction that the start of such an integration is not only possible but also timely. It is also foreseen that in this proposed methodological pluralism, the humanities disciplines, with their focus on meaning, need to play a crucial role. This is why the EUROCORES Programme EuroUnderstanding invites in particular researchers from the humanities to collaborate with each other, as well as with colleagues from the life sciences and social sciences, to work towards an integration of the above explanatory hierarchy and in this way advance the science and scholarship of understanding and misunderstanding.

EuroUnderstanding brings together 15 research projects from 13 different countries across Europe and the USA.

Running time: 2011-2014

Research budget: ca 3 M€

Collaborative Research Projects (CRPs)

Communication in Context: shared understanding in a complex world (CCCOM)

(ETF, FCT, NWO, RCN, VR)

The CCCOM project investigates the nature and preconditions of communicative success in the complex communicative situation that is the human predicament. The overall objective is to develop a new theory of communicative success, one that explains how communication is possible despite the obstacles posed by the cultural and contextual differences that form the backdrop of human interaction.

The main hypothesis is that successful communication requires sufficient overlap – but not necessarily identity – in the message communicated. This hypothesis is developed by all of the disciplines involved in the project: semantics, pragmatics, game theory, value theory, cognitive science, socio-linguistics, experimental philosophy and psychology.

Three central themes provide focal points for the project and tie together its theoretical and experimental aspects: **communicative success** (both with respect to the level of semantic content and with respect to the full pragmatic information), **context** (how does communication succeed in cases where the communicating subjects do not share exactly the same context?) and **coordination** (how do linguistic practices remain stable despite non-cooperative behaviour as in the case of lying and deception?).

Further information:

<http://www.cccom.ut.ee/>

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Digging for the Roots of Understanding (DRUST)

(CNR, FKK, FWO, MNiSW, NWO)

DRUST brings together seven European research groups that cover the full breadth of cognitive science (including anthropology, neuroscience, psychiatry, artificial intelligence, linguistics, philosophy and psychology) in an examination of how different types of common ground support interpersonal and intercultural understanding. Communication plays a key role for such an understanding but only to the extent that dialogue partners have sufficient common ground. Misunderstandings occur because most dimensions on which common ground can exist are not universally shared and not *a priori* present.

New research in the humanities and cognitive sciences shows that partners in dialogue and partners in action often differ in their perception of the situation, prior background, inference capacity and linguistic conventions. Although common ground is available when members of the same culture interact in well-defined contexts, considerable gaps in common ground occur when individuals with different cultural backgrounds interact in heterogeneous contexts. Profound misunderstandings easily go unnoticed. A better comprehension of the neural, psychological and cultural processes that establish common ground is thus crucial for identifying the roots of interpersonal and intercultural understanding.

Further information:

<http://web.mac.com/gknoblich/page1/page1.html>

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Understanding the Normative Dimensions of Human Conduct: conceptual and developmental issues (NormCon)

(FKK, FWF, VR)

The central goal of the NormCon project is to investigate the role of understanding norms and rules in domains that precede the development of higher-order mental abilities in children. This goal will be pursued in an interdisciplinary approach combining conceptual methods in philosophy with experimental work in developmental psychology. The project also investigates how issues of normativity vary between cultures, for example, children's experience of authority or their use and knowledge of social display rules.

One of NormCon's conceptual aims is to clarify how cognitive and non-cognitive ways of understanding are related to the concept of rule-following. The main question is how norms are recognised by participants in social interaction, as opposed to merely recognising a regularity to which one might adapt. This contrast is particularly important in studying how young children become aware of both conventional and non-conventional norms. Although the project takes it for granted that norms exist, the main concern is to explore how subjects pick them up and how norms can emerge from their interpretation of socially relevant behaviour.

Further information:

<http://uni-salzburg.at/NormCon>

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