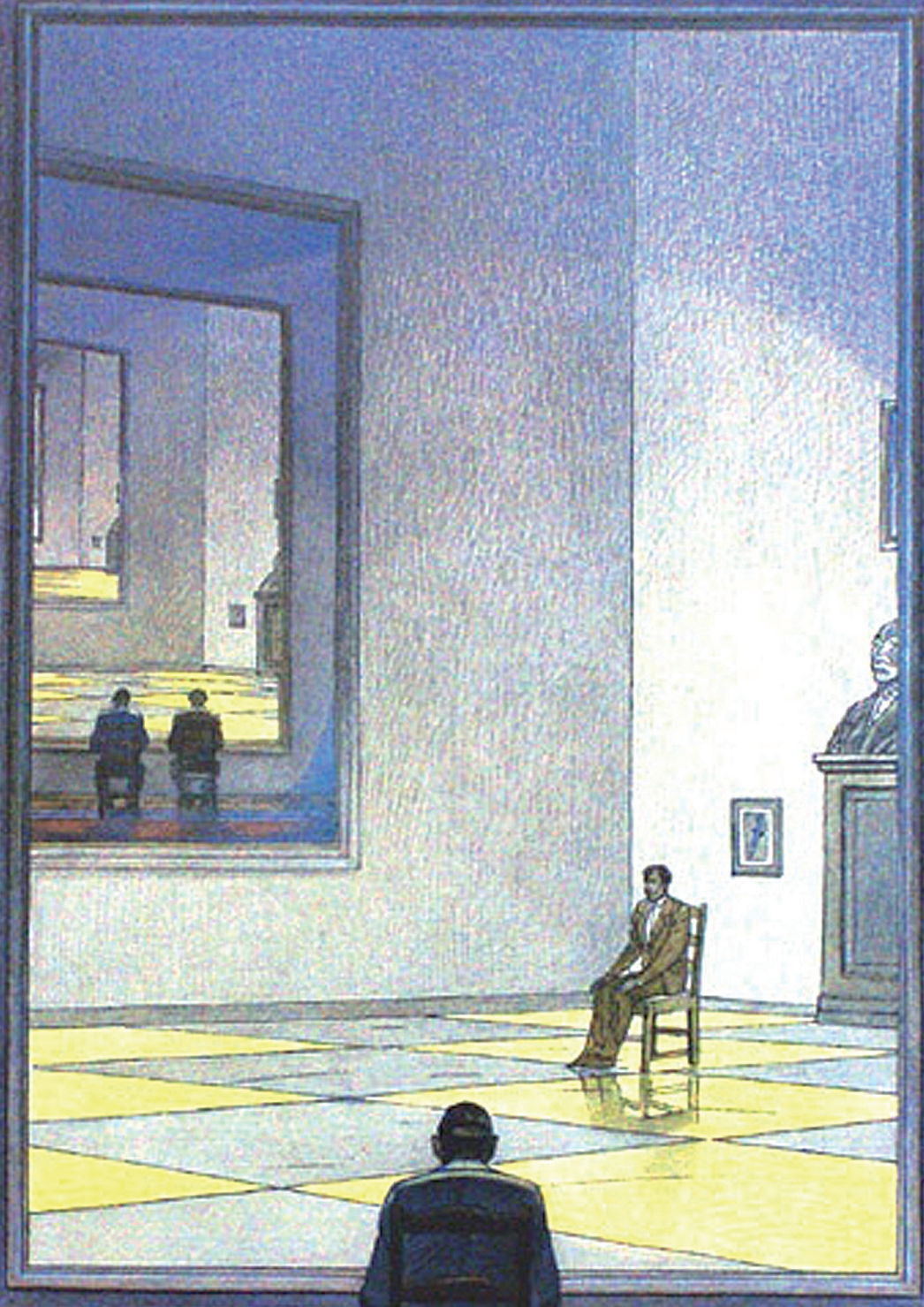


**EUROPEAN SOCIAL COGNITION NETWORK 2
(ESCON 2)**

Standing Committee for the Social Sciences (SCSS)



Introduction

The European Science Foundation (ESF) is an independent, non-governmental organisation, the members of which are 80 national funding agencies, research-performing agencies, academies and learned societies from 30 countries.

The strength of ESF lies in the influential membership and in its ability to bring together the different domains of European science in order to meet the challenges of the future.

Since its establishment in 1974, ESF, which has its headquarters in Strasbourg with offices in Brussels and Ostend, has assembled a host of organisations that span all disciplines of science, to create a common platform for cross-border cooperation in Europe.

ESF is dedicated to promote collaboration in scientific research, funding of research and science policy across Europe. Through its activities and instruments ESF has made major contributions to science in a global context. The ESF covers the following scientific domains:

- Humanities
- Life, Earth and Environmental Sciences
- Medical Sciences
- Physical and Engineering Sciences
- Social Sciences
- Marine Sciences
- Nuclear Physics
- Polar Sciences
- Radio Astronomy Frequencies
- Space Sciences



Immersive virtual environment technology in the study of prejudice (Dotsch & Wigboldus, JESP, 2008)

At the crossroads of cognitive and social sciences, social cognition is a “hub” sub-discipline. More than ever, social cognition researchers are intensifying their efforts to gain a better understanding of social behaviour and to find answers to the new challenges of our world. Given the complexity in the collection and analysis of the data and the level of information and skills needed to enrich social cognition knowledge with insights from neighbouring fields such as neurosciences, developmental psychology, behavioural economics, anthropology, linguistics, etc., social cognition can only hope to explore new scientific territories by creating intensive collaboration between laboratories, generations and disciplines. This Research Networking Programme builds upon earlier efforts to create a platform to facilitate European research collaboration in the field of social cognition and lead to the formulation of cutting-edge collaborative European research programmes.

ESCON 2 capitalises on and extends the former European Social Cognition Network (ESCON). The aim is to further improve European scientific collaboration in social cognition by calling upon the expertise and knowledge of active European researchers on the frontiers of social cognition, and proposing an advanced European research training package in social cognition that gives young scholars the opportunity to learn about developments in the field often unavailable in their local institutions as well as to develop scientific networks early on in their careers. The message for the new programme is that a key tool to improve the scientific environment offered to European researchers is to provide even more opportunities to directly “exchange” and “interact” among peers as well as with experts.

The running period of the ESF Research Networking Programme ESCON 2 is for five years from March 2009 to September 2014.

Cover picture:
François Schuiten,
The Mirror (1985)
Lithograph print, 99 cm x 69 cm

Status of the Field

The questions “What is knowledge?” and “How is it acquired and used?” have been at the centre of human inquiry since time immemorial. The last 50 years have seen concerted multidisciplinary efforts that changed the ways of conceptualising how knowledge is acquired, processed and used. This handle on cognition has shaped the development of robust, sophisticated and cumulative bodies of theory concerning such issues as the nature and impact of representations on judgments. Cognition cannot solely be regarded as an intra-individual phenomenon, as it is also transmitted and represented at a collective level. Because cognition is about the control of adaptive action at a social level, social cognition occupies a central position in the development of science and can be considered as a “hub” discipline as regards its fundamental and applied research.

At the interface of cognitive and social psychology, social cognition is responsive to key aspects of human action such as attitudes, decision making, communication, persuasion, judgments, memory, emotions, etc. In fact, social cognition promises to offer solutions for many of the challenging questions raised by our information society: migration and social movements, risk management, political attitudes and the influence of the media, reactions toward the internet and other new technologies, the effectiveness of education and training programmes, marketing and business, democratic decision making and regulation in crucial domains like health, aging, and economic action. Interestingly, many problems that are primarily understood and funded as problems of life sciences (e.g., mad cow disease) turn out to be substantially affected by issues of mental representation and public communication.

By directing research efforts on the intricate combination of social and cognitive dimensions that regulate human behaviour, social cognition provides innovative and efficient answers to contemporary challenges. Signs of this growing responsibility of social cognition in the public debate can be found in the widespread impact of such books as “Blink” by Malcolm Gladwell or “Stumbling on Happiness” by Daniel Gilbert, among others. A similar trend emerged in the scientific community, with the prestigious journal *Science* devoting its entire September 2007 issue #5843 to Social Cognition.

Social Cognition in Europe: contribution of ESCON

Historically, the European Social Cognition Network is the result of a series of bold initiatives. The initial step was taken by Belgian, Dutch and German researchers and facilitated by means of a multilateral agreement between the respective Science Foundations in these countries. Three conferences (Nijmegen 1999, Heidelberg 2000, Houffalize 2001) were organised to examine the effectiveness of a new forum for knowledge transfer among senior scientists, and to facilitate the training of the next generation of scientists in the field (PhD students). In addition, the committee secured *ad hoc* funding for a fourth conference (Paris 2002). This series was a resounding success. It fostered the exchange of the most recent scientific developments, provided a broad platform for graduate students to present their research projects and receive extensive feedback from experts in the field, allowed students to network with expert colleagues and facilitated “cohort building” among young scholars in Europe. Several seniors made concerted efforts to find more enduring solutions for the development of intra-European research collaboration and for the creation of a more permanent platform for graduate training. This initiative materialised in an ESF *à la carte* programme.

The previous European Social Cognition Network (ESCON) programme was funded for a five-year period by ESF Member Organisations across fifteen countries. Several indicators corroborate the success of the ESCON programme. No less than 308 social cognition researchers, of whom more than 66% were young scholars, took part in one of the four past ESCON Transfer of Knowledge Conferences. In total, 15 countries have been involved in the programme.

The influence of European researchers and the reputation of European training has greatly improved over the last decade, in particular since the ESCON programme has been supported by ESF. More than ever, the field of social cognition is influenced by new ideas, approaches, findings and methods that originated in European laboratories. A sure sign of this evolution is that three of the world’s most highly respected journals in social cognition invited Europeans to be Associate Editors. Editorial boards have also changed drastically over recent years. From a situation of almost total absence, some 20% of the editorial board members are now Europeans. A direct consequence is that European younger researchers are now inclined to send their work to these journals and these international outlets devote a growing share of their limited space to publications authored by Europeans. That the recent success story of European Social Cognition research co-occurred with the advent and development of ESCON can hardly be disputed. The ESCON 2 Research Networking Programme will ensure that more countries and a larger number of young scientists participate in the blossoming of this field in Europe.

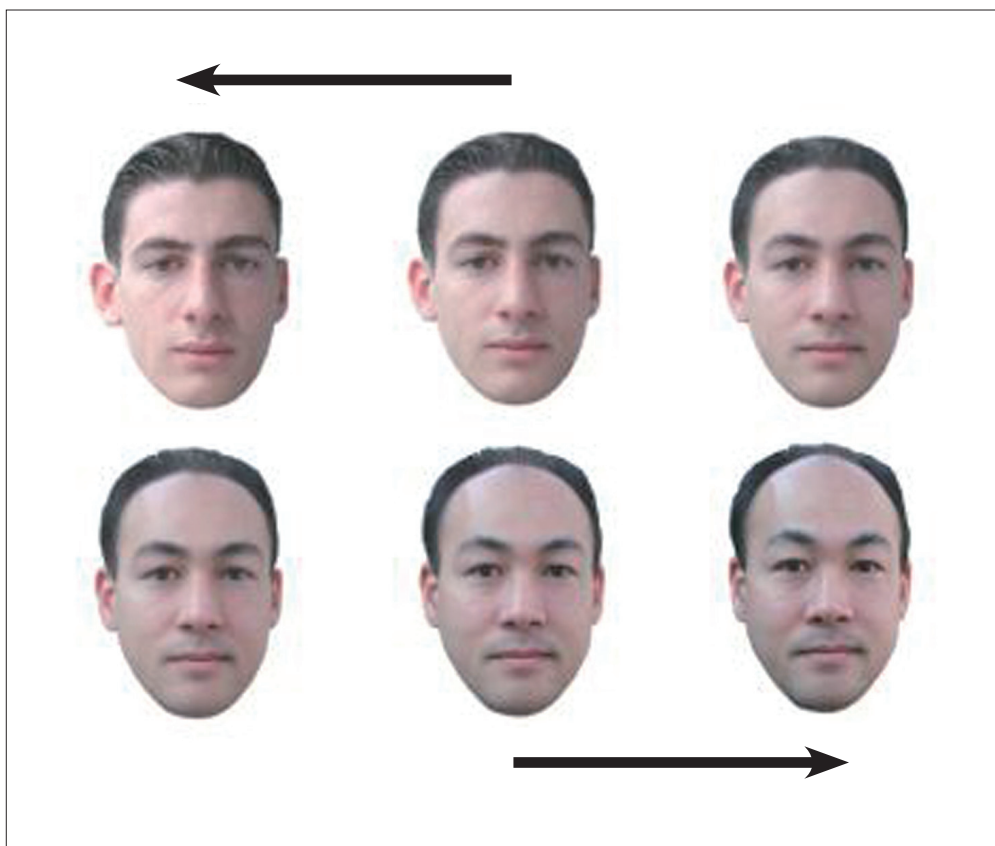
Aims and Objectives

Most evidently, the international character of research and the distribution of expertise across the diverse European countries are conditional on the existence of a European scientific network with a view not only to facilitate the development of joint research projects, but also to advance graduate training and facilitate research networking of young scholars. The essence of the European Social Cognition Network is to provide such a forum.

The objective of ESCON 2 is thus to be a leader in the promotion of social cognition research in regional and national environments where such research is less developed. The previous ESCON programme already took one such initiative by contacting and bringing Scandinavian colleagues together. This mobilised social cognition researchers in these countries and allowed them to directly connect to their European colleagues. Under the current project, a series of other national associations were contacted (Baltic countries, Croatia, Cyprus) not only to inform them about the activities of ESCON but also to make explicit the possibility for the researchers

working in these countries to take advantage of ESCON 2 for their training and research activities.

ESCON 2 aims to be involved in networking activities with the International Social Cognition Network (ISCON) and the European Association of Experimental Social Psychology (EAESP). ISCON is a joint enterprise between ESCON 2 and the US-based Person Memory Interest Group. As an umbrella society that advances international collaboration of social cognition scholars, ISCON is the official sponsor of the Social Cognition pre-conference that precedes the three-yearly EAESP General Meetings and the annual Society for Personality and Social Psychology conference. EAESP promotes excellence in Social Psychology research in Europe and counts 1 000 members all over the continent. In light of the similarities of the goals of these two organisations, the links between EAESP and ESCON 2 could definitely be reinforced. Indeed, the conditions for closer collaboration are being examined (preconference as well as joint ventures for summer schools).



Undirected categorization effects in the recollection of race-ambiguous faces (Corneille et al., JPSP, 2004).

Activities

This Research Networking Programme capitalises on and adapts two very successful activities, the Transfer of Knowledge Conferences (TKC) and Expert Meetings. It also adds two initiatives, namely a collaboration with EAESP to organise social cognition workshops during their summer schools and a web-based forum aimed at promoting the exchange of methods and techniques required for data collection and analyses specific to social cognition research.

Transfer of Knowledge Conferences (TKC) and Social Cognition Toolbox seminars

Over its five years of operation, ESCON 2 proposes to organise 5 annual TKC, each with 100 participants. Building upon the successful format of earlier editions, the 70%/30% ratio of younger researchers and senior experts is maintained. Due to the extension of the agreement with NSF, each TKC includes two keynote speakers from the US, along with two of their junior researchers. A similar agreement is sought with Israel, where social cognition is extremely well-developed.

Given the increasing complexity associated with data collection and analysis, the TKC programme includes one afternoon with Social Cognition Toolbox seminars (SCT). These SCT seminars provide participants with an opportunity to exchange information and experience with specific apparatus related to social cognition research (computerised experiments, advanced measures and experiment stimuli used in social cognition research), and to familiarise them with recent advances in data analytic tools and techniques. Senior experts are called upon to help disseminate knowledge.

The Expert Meetings

Annually, two Expert meetings of 12 participants are planned. The Expert meetings organised in the past have demonstrated the importance of social cognition as what we earlier called a “hub science”. Participation in Expert meetings is based on individual applications, proposals from the Steering Committee and advice from the Executive Group. The goal is to promote the creation of small research communities dealing with cutting-edge research topics. The main criteria for support are the potential for new collaborations between European researchers at a senior or advanced junior level along with the promise of cross-fertilisation of theoretical perspectives and empirical know-how.

Priority is also given to scientific questions at the frontiers of current knowledge. Expert meetings strive to include a few experts from other continents so that Europeans may use these meetings as springboards for inclusion in international networks, allowing Europe to be a major player in the scientific debate.

The Social Cognition workshops

ESCON 2 also intends to organise social cognition workshops in the context of biennial EAESP Summer Schools. This will increase the visibility and attractiveness of the field among social psychologists and provide social cognition researchers with an additional opportunity for fruitful scientific training and exchange. Under the terms of the agreement with EAESP, up to 15 graduate students are invited to participate in a two-week workshop under the supervision of two high-profile experts selected by the ESCON 2 Steering committee. The presence of other students constitutes a unique opportunity for theoretical cross-fertilisation and network creation between social cognition researchers and other promising social psychologists.

The Web-based Social Cognition Forum

Rather than pursuing the idea of an internet platform for teaching and studying social cognition, a new concept has arisen among ESCON 2 scholars that an internet forum should concentrate on the exchange of methods, tools and instruments. This will be of great profit, as some ongoing experiences from singular countries suggest.

Targets and Milestones

As the facilitation of cohort building of each new generation has been, and will be, our central goal, it is of paramount importance to collect reliable feedback from younger scholars. ESCON 2 intends to install a regular panel with feedback about the immediate and mediate outcomes of its activities based on data from the participants. Particular attention is also paid to the trajectories of young scientists. For instance, we are checking the track record of first-time TKC participants and monitoring the development of their research networks. Successful experiences are also being examined closely so as to uncover the key factors that have played a role. A mid-term report, using an international evaluation committee, is also planned in order to further improve the quality of the programme.

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For the latest information on this Research Networking Programme consult the ESCON 2 website:

www.esf.org/escon2

