PhD position available

Project: “Determinants of individualized socio-affective space and effects of psychosocial stress”

Responses to emotional stimuli in the social environment differ significantly between individuals, and they are related to subjective well-being as well as mental health. We recently introduced a new approach to capture individual representational spaces of affect, i.e., the socio-affective space paradigm. Based on the assumption that the experience of emotions is a highly individualized phenomenon, it was established that individual representational spaces of affect (‘affective spaces’) can be defined by asking study participants to arrange emotionally charged images on a computer screen according to their subjective emotional similarity. We speculate that more stable effects might emerge in this area of research, if the perception of affective stimuli in a social context is assessed with an innovative tool that gives consideration to the highly individual nature of emotional processes. In the present project, we propose to take advantage of the new paradigm in order to assess determinants like gender and cycle phase, habituation over time, a depressive state etc. of the ‘socio-affective space’ in healthy participants. Furthermore, acute psychosocial stress has an impact on emotion-related variables and social behaviour, thus, supporting a close link between individual representational spaces of affect and subjective / endocrine stress responses. Thus, we additionally plan to study if the subjective socio-affective space is sensitive to experimental changes in the individuals’ psychobiological state by exposure of participants to moderate psychosocial stress applying the well-established TSST (Trier Social Stress Test) protocol. This further allows for the investigation of associations between hypothalamus-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis stress responses and changes in subjective socio-affective space.

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