



IAS workshop report

## Social Cognition: Origins, Mechanisms and Disorders

28-29 August 2014

### Summary

Social cognition – the cognitive processes individuals use to understand and interact with others – is qualitatively different in humans compared to other primate species, underlying species-unique abilities for large-scale cooperation, culture, and conflict. As such, it is the focus of research in a wide variety of disciplines, and the key questions in this research field require a multi-disciplinary approach, which was what this workshop sought to encourage.

The workshop brought together internationally recognised experts to discuss how their latest research helps us answer the questions that define this field, including: the evolution and lifespan development of social cognition; the relationship between social cognition and general cognitive ability; and clinical applications of research into atypical social cognition.

We were delighted to welcome participants from disciplines including anthropology, biology, education, and psychiatry, as well as all areas of psychology. Participants attended from as far afield as Hong Kong and Canada, as well as from Europe and the UK. Four keynote talks were accompanied by ten shorter papers and two very lively poster sessions. Six early-career bursaries enabled PhD students and recent post-doctoral researchers without additional funding to attend, contributing to their career development and providing them with opportunities to discuss their research with international experts in this field.

### Event themes

The event was organised around four areas, comprising: evolutionary origins; lifespan development; psychological and neuroscientific mechanisms; and disorders of social cognition. However it quickly became clear from the discussions that certain themes permeated all these areas of research. These included the following:

- What are the evolutionary origins of our social cognitive abilities?
- What is the relationship between social cognition and intelligence?
- Do social competencies rely on domain-general mechanisms?

- How does lifespan development relate to phylogeny?
- How can we harness our knowledge of social cognition to understand atypical development and cognition?

## Outcomes

The most immediate outcome was a sense of shared endeavour across scientists from the different disciplines. The final discussion session highlighted important priorities for future research that would not have emerged from a uni-disciplinary meeting. Future workshops on this topic have now been planned, with Bangor University hosting the 2015 workshop and a 2016 workshop in York. We hope that this will ensure continuation of the momentum which this first workshop has achieved. Over the next few years, we anticipate that such a series of annual meetings on this topic will consolidate the importance of multidisciplinary research into social cognition and position Surrey, within the UK more generally, as a key player in this research field.

Participants were keen to contribute to a journal special issue on the topic of social cognition, and a pre-submission proposal to *Philosophical Transactions B* met with an encouragement to submit a full proposal on this topic, which will be submitted in October 2014.

## Acknowledgements

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## Organisers

Dr Caroline Catmur (ESRC Future Research Leader and Senior Lecturer, School of Psychology, University of Surrey)

Dr Emily Cross (School of Psychology, Bangor University, & Donders Institute for Brain, Cognition and Behaviour, Radboud University, Nijmegen)

Dr Harriet Over (Department of Psychology, University of York)

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