

PRESS RELEASE

Facilitating Cross-Cultural Education and Research University of Cologne and AUS co-organize a German-Arab Summer School

How do we understand others? What is the common denominator in social cognition? How does culture influence self construal and communication? These were central topics of the international Summer School Program "Social and Cultural Cognition", held at the University of Cologne, Germany, July 17th - 24th. The Summer School was part of the interdisciplinary research project "Culture and Social Cognition", funded by the German Volkswagen Foundation. This project is building on a more than seven-year-long, well-established research collaboration between the American University of Sharjah (Professor Ahmad Al-Issa) and University of Cologne (Professor Gary Bente). It aims at exploring the biological, psychological and cultural determinants of human communication, putting a strong emphasis on Arab (Middle-East) and German (Western-European) culture.

The Summer School Program, financially supported by the Volkswagen Foundation, was organized and supervised by the PIs of the research project: Professor Gary Bente (Psychology) and Professor Kai Vogeley (Neuroscience), both from the University of Cologne (UoC), and Professor Albert Newen (Philosophy) from the Ruhr-University Bochum (RUB), in close cooperation with Professor Ahmad Al-Issa (Communication) from the American University of Sharjah (AUS) in the United Arab Emirates. The Summer School brought together 12 Arab students from AUS and 12 German students, the majority coming from UoC, representing diverse disciplines, such as psychology, philosophy, medicine, economics, mass communication, international relations, computer and media science, all sharing a deep interest in cross-cultural communication and research. The unique program was aimed at merging different approaches to the investigation of human communication and the exploration of cultural diversity. It endeavored to develop a balanced combination among field experience, scientific training in theory and methods as well as hands-on research.



Reception at the City Hall Cologne. Students from AUS and Germany were cordially welcomed by mayor Manfred Wolf, who gave some insight into Cologne's mentality and lifestyle.

Morning seminars, supervised by the organizers, were held by the Cologne team, focusing on topics such as cultural value systems, self construal, and stereotypes. Diaries written by the guest students during their leisure time and special excursions were used to make theoretical discussions more concrete and to answer some burning questions about appropriate behavior in the foreign environment.



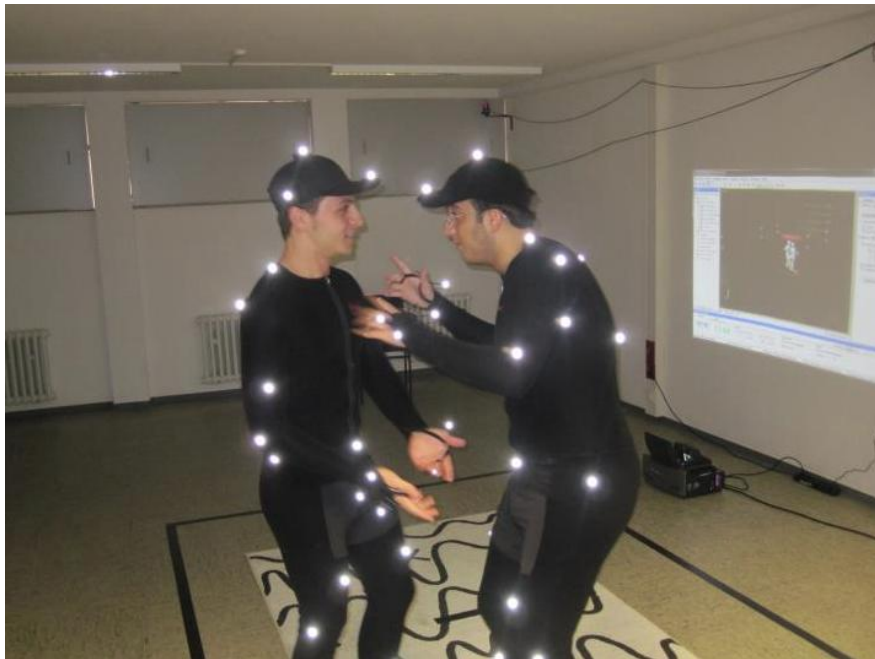
Intensive group work during morning seminars and the student mini research projects supervised by the Cologne research team.

Three evening lectures, delivered by internationally renowned researchers in the field of social and cultural cognition, complemented the seminars by giving deeper insights into the state of the art in theory and methodology. Professor Shihui Han, psychologist and neuroscientist at Peking University, gave a talk on brain mechanisms and cultural differences in social information processing and empathic understanding. Shaun Gallagher, professor of Philosophy and Cognitive Science at the University of Central Florida, presented a critical reflection on approaches to understanding the human mind, particularly addressing the relationship between mind and body. The final speaker, Jon Shah, professor of Experimental MRI at the Research Center Juelich, introduced the audience into the fascinating world of brain imaging, making the complex technologies understandable and demonstrating their use in clinical diagnostics and basic research.



Professor Jon Shah giving his fascinating introduction into brain imaging technologies and demonstrating ways to observe the brain while thinking.

The students also participated in ongoing cross-cultural studies. Lively recordings of nonverbal interactions were taken in the Cologne Motion Capture Laboratory, which will now be analyzed in relation to cultural specificities in human movement and social perception. Brain scans were taken from the students while observing dyadic interactions from different cultures, which will reveal further insight into neural cultural specificities in social perception and impression formation.



Two AUS students in the Motion Capture Lab recording nonverbal behavior in dyadic interactions.

The final part of the program, entitled "Me the Researcher", allowed the students to form mixed-culture groups and to develop their own modest collaborative research projects under the supervision of research experts. The studies used online-based survey methods to answer questions related to cultural differences in youth culture, self and other stereotypes of Arabs and Germans, and the need for control in everyday life. The most interesting outcomes of the projects were presented to the student and expert audience, issuing intensive discussions and the unanimous desire to continue exchange and collaborative research. A website was set up for this purpose, which already denotes considerable online traffic, marking this Summer School as a starting point for enduring relations and cross cultural collaboration. At the end of this week of scientific training and cross-cultural exchange, all participants agreed that the Summer School was a great success and a wonderful personal experience. One of the Arab students expressed the feelings of the whole group: "This was an amazing week. I learned so much, and I can't wait to meet you all again as soon as possible."



Presenting the results of the student mini studies: A wonderful combination of humor and scientific facts.