



2018 European Francisco J. Varela Award Recipients

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The enhancement of compassion in burdened couple relationships and its impact on immune-functioning

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Compassionate attitude training in a challenging school context in Brussels. - An effectiveness study assessing the impact on well-being, prosocial attitudes and behavior, and socio-psychological attitudes concerning prejudice.

Mike Keesman

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Mindfulness effects on pain beyond placebo effects: Disentangling the role of decentering and positive treatment expectations

Heather McDonald

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Ciaran Tobin

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Sebastjan Vörös

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Laying Down a Path in Walking: The Life-Worlds of Francisco Varela

Corina Aguilar-Raab

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The enhancement of compassion in burdened couple relationships and its impact on immune-functioning

Depression ranks among the most widespread psychological disorders. Depression is not only defined by alterations in affect, but more importantly, by impairments in social competencies. Depressed patients show reduced capability of empathy and limited perspective taking. Psychobiological research in depression has revealed altered levels of inflammation that is important in the understanding of the immunological mechanisms. Interleukines IL-1 β and IL-6 play an important role as they decrease following different interventions. Cognitively-Based Compassion Training (CBCT) is the most tested compassion program in which psychobiological evaluation criteria were successfully applied. The use in the clinical field – especially in consideration of romantic relationships – has hardly been investigated up to now.

We aim to investigate the extent to which a modified CBCT- for Couples (CBCT-fC) reduces depressive symptoms in the patient, distress in the partner, and enhances interactional skills. 50 couples with the female partner suffering from recurrent depression will take part in a longitudinal randomized controlled trial. We will examine the effects of CBCT-fC on depressive symptoms and related immune functioning with the special focus on IL-1 β and IL-6 pre- to post-training. Cytokines will be analyzed via blood sampling. We will use repeated-measurement ANOVAs and multi-level analyses to take into account the dyadic structure of the data. Based on combining first-, second-, and third-person approaches, these results will not only shed more light on the immune concomitants as an outcome of therapy in depressive couples, but also will confirm if CBCT-fC can help to rebuild healthy relationships via enhancement of compassion.

Filip Van Droogenbroeck

Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Belgium

Compassionate attitude training in a challenging school context in Brussels. - An effectiveness study assessing the impact on well-being, prosocial attitudes and behavior, and socio-psychological attitudes concerning prejudice.

Brussels is the second most cosmopolitan city in the world. Superdiversity creates a vibrant city but also tensions between social groups. Brussels regularly reaches the media with reports of homophobia on the street by young Muslims. There is a fear of religious radicalization and general concern about aversion towards secular values in some groups. On the other hand, children with migration roots often report feelings of discrimination and exclusion by society. It is clear that superdiverse cities lead to great cultural enrichment but also causes tensions between groups.

This project explicitly focuses on a contemplative-based training program for cultivating compassion and care as a proof of concept of prosocial education. We assess if the school-wide implementation of a Compassionate Attitude Training (CAT) program has positive effects on the well-being, prosocial attitudes and behavior, and socio-psychological attitudes related to prejudice (e.g., homophobia, anti-Semitism,...) among +- 400 students and +-60 teachers and principals in two low socio-economic status (SES) secondary education schools in Brussels, Belgium. The CAT explicitly focuses on increasing social engagement, prosocial attitudes and interpersonal solidarity regardless of origin, ethnicity, gender or religion. To measure the effects of this intervention, we conduct an independent effectiveness study in a pre/post/follow-up design. This project would add to the scarce research

which focuses on CAT programs in educational settings and measures actual prosocial behavior. To the best of our knowledge this would also be one of the first studies to assess the impact of CAT programs on socio-psychological attitudes related to prejudice.

Mike Keesman

Leiden University, the Netherlands

Mindfulness effects on pain beyond placebo effects: Disentangling the role of decentering and positive treatment expectations

Mindfulness-based interventions have become popular as a treatment for pain, and research shows that they are effective at doing so. Yet, placebo research shows that people's positive expectations of the treatment can greatly contribute to the found intervention effects in research, and people have increasingly positive expectations of mindfulness. As typical mindfulness research does not include active control groups that are highly similar to the intervention group, the reported effects could be explained by a placebo effect, rather than an active mindfulness component.

To overcome this gap in knowledge, we integrate the experimental rigor from field of placebo effects into the field of mindfulness. We propose using balanced placebo design to test pain during a cold-pressor task before and after a combination of (sham)mindfulness and (sham)expectations. To that end, we experimentally induce decentering as an active component of mindfulness (i.e. the insight that experiences are impermanent), or induce sham-decentering as an active control. In addition, we experimentally induce positive or sham expectations about the training. To gain insight into the phenomenological experience of decentering and expectations, which is novel to the placebo field, we ask people to list their experiences of the cold sensations, and how they related to them. The combination of third- and first-person research should offer fine-grained insight into whether and how positive expectations separately and interactively contribute to decentering effects on pain relief. Understanding these mechanisms may improve future mindfulness research by taking account of placebo effects, and improve MBIs' effects by explicitly using positive expectations.

Heather McDonald

Institute of Psychiatry, Psychology & Neuroscience, King's College London, Great Britain

Turning the Curse into a Blessing: Using Mindfulness to Reduce Suspiciousness and Paranoia in Individuals with High Positive Schizotypy

Positive schizotypy has emerged as a significant predictor of schizophrenia-spectrum disorders, with suspiciousness/paranoia carrying particularly strong predictive power. Positive schizotypy is also linked to creativity – a link thought to be underlined by decreased information filtering. Given that psychopharmacotherapy, the main psychosis-prevention strategy, exerts a dampening effect on the filtering mechanism, alternative interventions are needed to reduce psychosis risk whilst preserving conditions promoting creativity. Mindfulness could be such an intervention, as experienced mindfulness meditators show attenuated sensory information filtering and higher magical thinking than the general population yet low suspiciousness/paranoia, suggesting that different aspects of positive schizotypy are dissociable with mindfulness practice.

The aims are to investigate i) the inter-relationship between positive schizotypy, decreased information filtering and creativity; ii) effectiveness of mindfulness practice on reducing suspiciousness aspect of positive schizotypy without affecting decreased information filtering thought to support creativity. Forty participants with high positive schizotypy (HPS) and 40

participants with low-to-moderate positive schizotypy will be assessed on creativity and sensory information filtering. Individuals with HPS will then be offered a mindfulness-based intervention and will be assessed on suspiciousness before and after completion. Sensory information filtering will also be reassessed post-intervention. This project will be the first to study the link between positive schizotypy, creativity and decreased information filtering in the same sample, and to evaluate the potential of mindfulness training to reduce psychosis risk in high positive schizotypy. Finding alternative approaches to reducing psychosis risk whilst preserving conditions supporting creativity are needed for the enrichment of the individual and society.

Ciaran Tobin

University College London, Great Britain

Tibetan Mind Science and Western Mental Health: A Cultural Congruence Framework

Current Western approaches to mental health (MH) based on the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM V) have fueled a contentious debate concerning how modern society should treat mental disturbance. The British Psychological Society (BPS) suggests a ‘paradigm shift’ within the field of MH, and call for alternative conceptual approaches away from the current ‘disease model’. Academic literature reveals an imbalance within Western psychology concerning non-Western approaches to MH. Buddhist ideas have become popular in Western societies, and we might see the popularity of mindfulness techniques as an invitation to explore a much wider range of practices available from their original traditional context.

Aim: To develop a culturally congruent model of MH between Tibetan and Western psychologies. Cultural congruence is grounded in understanding (a) the worldview of the indigenous community, (b) the influence of one’s own worldview, and (c) the skillful integration of knowledge into psychotherapy services. This model will be disseminated as a medical anthropology/MH academic textbook. **Method:** Application of anthropological research methods in MH such as: narrative interviews, participant observation, textual analysis, a working collaboration with Western and Tibetan scholars. **Impact:** Complement existing knowledge/help narrow the gap between two divided paradigms. Research offers (a) students and health practitioners alternative perspectives and options when diagnosing and treating the individual, (b) a logical framework for exploring the Western view of the brain and the Tibetan view of the mind, (c) a scientifically holistic cross-cultural model of MH and alternative conceptual model as called for by the BPS.

Anthony Tuckwell

University of Warwick, Great Britain

The Differential Effects of Attention and Insight Meditations on Economic Decision-Making: Evidence on Four Behavioural Biases from a Randomised-Control Trial

In this study we will analyse and test the effects of attention and insight meditations on four types of behavioural bias in an economic framework: identity priming; self-control; heuristic and egocentric biases. Qualities of attention developed through meditation offer a direct avenue for improving decision-making over a range of domains: the more we pay attention, the more information we can process, and therefore the better our chances of making a good decision. However, our capacity to pay attention becomes a second-order concern if our attention itself is fundamentally biased - namely, by a view of our “self” as static, unidimensional and independent of the environment (that we argue has an evolutionary basis).

Such a view undermines our potential to see a primed identity as just one of a set of identities, or a desire triggered by a tempting environment as one of a set of desires, and, in addition, adds a weight of ego to our thoughts that hampers any potential to spot misguided intuitions or distorted beliefs about ourselves/others. Insight meditation, by systematically addressing this self-perspective, offers a channel over-and-above attention through which meditation remedies these four biases. Our empirical design incorporates two ten-week treatments, an active control and a wait-list control to analyse these differential effects on the biases (measured using experimental methods). Our results we hope will deepen our understanding of the possible benefits of these specific meditations while representing an important step in bringing contemplative science to the as-yet uncharted field of economics.

Sebastjan Vörös

Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia

Laying Down a Path in Walking: The Life-Worlds of Francisco Varela

Francisco Varela was an extremely prolific and creative thinker whose interests encompassed many scientific disciplines and philosophical traditions (ranging from biology and cognitive neuroscience to phenomenology and wisdom traditions). However, due to his untimely death, the many strands of his life and thought have never been integrated into a coherent, unified whole. This is unfortunate, as it has often led to misunderstanding and neglect of the ground-breaking potential of his ideas.

The project purports to remedy this lack by laying the foundations for a comprehensive monograph on Francisco Varela's life and work. Its goal is twofold: first, to present various facets of Varela's thought and show that they can be best understood against a unified philosophical framework; second, to argue that, for Varela, this unified framework wasn't a strictly academic endeavor, but a platform for cultivating an ongoing dialogue between one's intellectual pursuits and one's everyday life. The monograph will be based on a careful identification, collection and examination of relevant primary and secondary sources (both published and unpublished) and on in-depth interviews with his collaborators and family members. In this way, it will aim at elucidating both the content of Varela's ideas, and the cultural and intellectual milieu that gave rise them. The monograph will contribute not only to a better understanding of Varela's life and work, but will also provide a rigorous platform for a more balanced exchange between scientific, philosophical, and contemplative approaches to mind, life, and consciousness.