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What does your research focus on?

My research interests evolve around the central topic of “emotion”. Specifically, my work tries to elucidate how emotions influence attention and cognitive control? How, in turn, emotions are modulated through cognitive processes? And what role the capacity to modulate emotions plays in understanding others? I study these questions in the context of psychopathology, using neuroscience tools to better understand the neural bases of alterations in depression, bipolar disorder, and other mental disorders.

What drew you to this line of research and why is it exciting to you?

Thinking about this question, I realized that I have always been strongly drawn to better understand emotions and how they are shared, but that I don’t really know why. I guess it’s always been more of a feeling. But I can come up with good reasons to keep investigating emotions, the most important being that well-being and long-term mental health seem to be predicted by good abilities to manage/deal with/accept your own emotions. They may, therefore, play a key role in understanding and improving mental disorders. And using neuroscience tools is tremendously exciting because it allows probing a whole range of layers of psychological phenomena

Who were/are your mentors or scientific influences?

My first steps into neuroscience were guided by Mike Posner, who always managed to integrate my small thoughts and ideas with the grand picture. My understanding of the connection of psychological and brain mechanisms is still very much influenced by his perspective. Later, I have been very fortunate to work first in Angela Friederici's group and then directly in her group with Sonja Kotz at the Max Planck Institute for Human Cognitive and Brain Sciences in Leipzig. Also, I am greatly thankful for the time I spent in Michèle Wessa's group, where I learned a lot about using neuroscience tools for clinical psychology questions. Very recently I started working with Tania Singer, who is a truly visionary researcher and inspiring mentor.

What's your future research agenda?

Studying mental disorders inevitably raises questions regarding the plasticity of observed impairments, for example in emotion regulation capabilities. In the future I hope to be able to contribute to our understanding of (1) what interventions have the potential to induce change, (2) which functions exactly are malleable, and (3) what the neural mechanisms are that underlie change.

What publication are you most proud of?

Kanske P., Heissler J., Schönfelder S., Bongers A., & Wessa. M. (2011). How to regulate emotion? Neural networks for reappraisal and distraction. *Cerebral Cortex, 21,* 1379–1388.

It is my first paper on emotion regulation, a topic that interests me greatly and that I also believe to be highly relevant for a number of different psychopathologies. We compared two different techniques, reappraisal and distraction, which we found both to be effective in modulating subjective emotion and amygdala activity. Interestingly, however, the neural networks that achieve this regulating effect are not the same. In a couple of follow-up studies we could show that the differentiation between these techniques is critical for our understanding of impaired emotion regulation in depression and bipolar disorder.