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Resonating emotions: an embodied perspective on alterations in facial emotion processing in autism and social anxiety

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Citation

Folz, J. (2025, January 17). *Resonating emotions: an embodied perspective on alterations in facial emotion processing in autism and social anxiety*.

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Resonating emotions:

**An embodied perspective on alterations in facial
emotion processing in autism and social anxiety**

Julia Folz

Colofon

ISBN/EAN: 978-90-834947-8-4

Cover design: Julia Folz & Charles Gateau

Lay-out: Ferdinand van Nispen, *my-thesis.nl*

Printing: Proefschriftenprinten.nl, Ede, The Netherlands

The research featured in this thesis was funded by the Dutch National Science Foundation (Nederlandse Organisatie voor Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek, NWO), in the form of a VIDI grant awarded to Mariska E. Kret under project number 016. VIDI.185.036.

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Resonating emotions:
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Proefschrift

ter verkrijging van

de graad van doctor aan de Universiteit Leiden,

op gezag van rector magnificus prof.dr.ir. H. Bijl,

volgens besluit van het college voor promoties

te verdedigen op vrijdag 17 januari 2025

klokke 10.00 uur

door

Julia Folz

geboren te Ulm

in 1993

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(University of California San Diego)
Dr. Manon Mulckhuyse
Dr. Sebo Uithol



Acknowledgements

Obtaining a PhD is a rollercoaster, and navigating the highs and lows would have been impossible without the support I was experiencing. Although I may not have the space to mention everyone by name, I wholeheartedly thank you for being by my side. In particular, I want to thank the following people:

Mariska Kret, you helped me to see the bigger picture and provided me with endless opportunities for development. Your trust and encouragement have been invaluable for my growth. Milica Nikolić, working with you was an immense pleasure and I could not have wished for a better daily supervisor. Much of my scientific output, as well as my personal well-being, are attributable to your support.

My paranympths Fabiola Diana and Tom Roth: Fabi, we were aligned from the very beginning, and I cannot imagine my time in the Netherlands without you. It is rare to find such a close companion in science and real life. Tom, our discussions, ranging from statistical approaches to life philosophy, have always been a great inspiration. Independent of the type of support, I know I can rely on you. Thanks also to Chris Riddell and Carina Forster, additional paranympths in my heart. Chris, both organizing and attending conferences, we had the best time together. Your refreshing approach to the PhD and knowledge facilitated my journey a lot. Carina, becoming friends at first sight as summer school students in Greece, we never lost track of each other. Though geographically distant, you have always been close, especially in times of important life decisions.

My gratitude also goes to all CoPAN lab members, students, and the Cognitive Psychology unit at Leiden University. Yena Kim, for joining my explorations and taking care of me. Your positive approach to life and your amazing cooking skills always lifted me up. My first office mates Eliska Prochazkova, Evy van Berlo and Friederike Scholten, for helping me to ease into the PhD with lots of knowledge and the occasional gossip. My project collaborators Anouschka van Dijk, Evania Fasya and Ruya Akdag, for finding solutions together in an enjoyable working environment. Selin Topel, Iliana Samara and Tonko Zijlstra, for sharing PhD struggles and offering support whenever needed. Thanks also to the SOLO Research support, specifically Elio Sjak-Shie, a partner in technical and not-so-technical crimes, Evert Dekker, for always having an open ear and solution, and Iris Spruit, for support in the face of software issues.

In addition to my colleagues in Leiden, I was lucky to have excellent collaborators abroad. Thanks to Katja Koelkebeck and Kristina Nikić in Essen for many long yet pleasant meetings, enabling a smooth data collection with clinical samples. To Piotr Winkielman for the warm welcome to UCSD and the highly stimulating discussions, challenging my existing conceptualizations. And to all inspiring scientists, such as Dimitris Bolis and Leonhard Schilbach, who motivated me to embark upon and to stay on the PhD journey.

As much as scientific ideas can inspire you, so can friends. Thanks to my school friends, Anna, Henni, Sivani, Nina, Anni, Anki, Rosi, Toni and Dennis, for staying by my side, even if our lives went different paths. To my Yoga girls Annki and Maïke: Our chats, wherever we manage to meet, are the most beautiful grounding experiences. To the headquarter girls Isa and Ange, for solving all imaginable problems in just an aperitivo's time, especially during the Covid pandemic. To Flo, for always listening to my insecurities and brightening up my mood. To the Rotterdam Boltzifusion and Marktfamilia, musicians and dancers, particularly Magic, Ella, Pinkie, Bubu, Bupi, JJ, Alessandro, Marco, Eliala, Alex, Max, Dani, Charles and Jurriaan. You gave my life so much playfulness and sparkles. A special shout-out also to the Munich people, my boys Janni, Nico & Chris, Alyssa, Erica and all NCP people (on fire), Thomsì and Nadia.

Last but not least, I want to thank the people who provided me with the base to flourish: my family. My dad Diede, for your never-ending support in my travels to different places and your countless visits. Our active time together, at home or on vacations, always help me to put academic challenges into perspective. My mother Ulle, for giving me so much love and curiosity for life when I was a child. Even though you could not accompany me in person anymore later in life, your care has given me the strength and sensitivity to become who I am today. Here, I also want to thank my extended family who has always been there for me. Lastly, my sister Anna, the one I can rely on, however bad the situation may seem. Even though you might not fully agree with all my life choices, you support me in each one of them, and I'm incredible grateful for your presence in my life.

Julia Folz

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Preface

In 2018, Mariska Kret received a VIDI grant (number 016.VIDI.185.036) by the Dutch research Council (Nederlandse Organisatie voor Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek) to investigate “Emotional contagion in autism and social anxiety”. For the practical implementation of the research, she advertised a PhD position, zooming in on the bodily signature of emotional social exchanges. Especially one part of the project, which involved real interactions with simultaneous physiological recordings of both interactants, caught my interest. Following my successful application, we decided that it should become the focus of my dissertation.

Starting as first PhD student on a new, highly complex project typically comes with various challenges. Some of them were expected, like setting up and piloting all tasks in a student population, learning diagnostic procedures, or applying for ethical approval with the Medical Ethics Committee. Some other challenges could not be easily predicted, such as long delays in the application process for ethical approval or changes in supervisors. Yet, the biggest challenge that I, and every other individual at that time, had to face was the Covid-19 pandemic. There is probably no need to go into the details of the detrimental effects that the pandemic had on daily life and well-being. It had, however, also a strong impact on the course of my PhD project. For long time periods, conducting research, particularly real interaction studies and with vulnerable populations, seemed impossible.

Fortunately, I had already collected data for the non-interactive parts of the project with student samples, which I could analyze. In addition, I was very lucky to be surrounded by great collaborators and support staff. Together with my fellow PhD student Fabiola Diana and the technical support of Leiden University, we developed procedures to continue data collection and even prepare interactive studies in Leiden when the pandemic was slowly waning. Moreover, in sporadic visits (when possible) and continuous video calls, my fellow PhD student Kristina Nikic and I managed to prepare the data collection at our collaborators’ testing site, at the LVR hospital in Essen (Germany). The great efforts of our German collaborators, under the supervision of Katja Koelkebeck, rendered the inclusion of a dissertation chapter with a clinical sample possible. Although I had to let go of my initial goal to focus on the part of the project including real social interactions, I could still realize my interests within the project. Carried by the flexibility and trust of my promotor Mariska Kret, I zoomed in on the role of the ability and inclination to sense and interpret internal signals (i.e., interoception) in emotion perception. This addition

seemed not only the logical consequence of my embodied perspective on facial emotion processing but also provided novel insights to the existing literature. Looking back on the journey, besides experiences of frustration, the challenges pushed me to growth in directions that I would not have imagined. The results are reflected in the current dissertation, and this preface could hopefully offer the reader useful contextual information.