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Abstracts / Speakers

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The current state of research on colour and emotion associations

Dr. Domicele Jonauskaite
Faculty of Psychology, University of Vienna, Austria
Domicele.Jonauskaite@univie.ac.at

Colours carry certain affective meaning to most people. We feel blue, see red, are green with envy. Obviously, with our linguistic, cultural, and perceptual environments being rich in affective colour meanings, colour-emotion associations can also be detected in controlled laboratory settings. In this talk, I will focus on associations between colours and emotions, and empirical studies conducted in our psychology lab in the last five years. By consistently using the same methodology in different samples of participants, we reached four conclusions. First, colours and emotions are associated systematically (not randomly), with a possible exception of purple. Second, colour-emotion associations are universal, at least when testing associations with colour terms across 30 nations. Third, these associations are further modulated by perceptual and linguistic experiences. Fourth, colour-emotion associations have a strong conceptual component. With this knowledge at hand, I will highlight some open questions for the future.

What do we think about colours? Coding free associations with colour terms

Déborah Epicoco
Institute of Psychology, University of Lausanne, Switzerland
Deborah.Epicoco@unil.ch

Beyond their proper definitions, words carry additional meanings according to contexts. Colour terms are key examples in this regard. Thus, we collected free associations with purple, violet and lilac in French (n = 2074 associations) and assessed meaning using our coding scheme, consisting of nine themes: i) experiential (sensory and affective experiences), ii) human-made objects, iii) natural elements and objects, iv) scenery, v) abstract concepts, vi) people, vii) colour terms, viii) personal, and ix) ambiguous words. Most themes can be further separated into different levels of abstraction: superordinate, basic, and subordinate. Two researchers coded 20% of associations, resulting in an almost perfect inter-rater reliability (k = .848). Comparisons showed the scheme's ability to depict associated meaning in organized ways (i.e., natural elements and objects as the main theme for all colour terms). We argue our coding scheme can be applied to a wide range of answers related to colours and offers insight into their meaning.

Colour-emotion associations are unrelated to current mood

Giulia Spagnulo
Institute of Psychology, University of Lausanne, Switzerland
Giulia.Spagnulo@etu.unige.ch

When asked to represent their current mood through colours, participants are relatively consistent in their choices. We know that joyful mood is frequently represented lighter chromatic colours, whereas fearful mood is frequently represented by darker achromatic colours. To further investigate, we tested whether we might activate such colour parameter biases through mood induction. We looked at colour choices for the emotion concepts of love, anger, disgust, and admiration. Between subjects, we successfully induced either joy in 37 participants (13 men) or fear in 34 participants (10 men). Afterwards, participants selected the most representative colour for love, anger, disgust, and admiration using a colour picker. We found no evidence for different colour parameter biases as a function of participants' mood, whether considering lightness, $t(67) = -0.30$, $p = .768$, or chroma, $t(67) = -1.69$, $p = .095$. This supports previous notions that the affective representations