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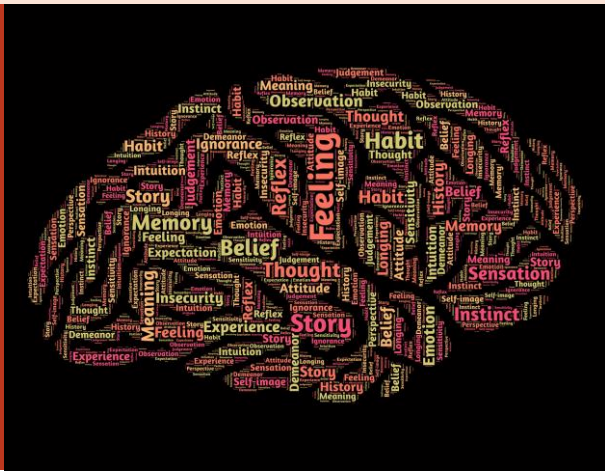
Jeudi 6 février 2025

14h-15h30

Faculté de Médecine - Amphi C

Cognitive aging in (older) autistic adults



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Neurodevelopmental conditions, like autism, are in the diagnostic manuals defined as conditions with early atypical brain development which has cascading negative effect on cognitive processes important for the entire lifespan. Difference on both the brain level and cognitive level between autistic people and 'neurotypicals' are also the starting point for the neurodiversity paradigm. However, to understand the concept, course, and consequences of these cognitive differences and to provide adequate support when needed, it is crucial to study the full life span, thus including old age. Unfortunately, autism studies into old age are scarce. This is especially worrisome as findings from epidemiological studies suggest that autistic people have an increased risk for developing neurodegenerative conditions such as dementia and Parkinson disease.

Moreover, the cognitive differences between autistic and non-autistic children and teens seem to be the most prominent in those cognitive domains that are known to be sensitive to cognitive decline (e.g., information processing speed, executive functioning). Therefore, the dominant assumption is that autistic adults have an increased risk for accelerated aging. The primary logical step would be to test cognition, but this was hardly done. The first cross-sectional cognitive study we conducted challenged the accelerated cognitive aging assumption as patterns of parallel aging and protective aging were observed as well. In this talk I will discuss recent evidence in favor of and against the accelerative aging assumption and how increased heterogeneity among autistic adults increases the complexity of obtaining overarching conclusions.

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