Project 9:

One goal of the RTG is to study the role of situated emotions for social understanding, deciding and acting. Research in developmental psychology has shown that infants seek and use others’ perceptions and interpretations of ambiguous situations to form their own interpretations of those situations. The child regulates his or her behavior or emotional reaction toward the object of reference according to the other person’s message (Stenberg & Hagekull 1997). This process is known as “social referencing” (Feinman 1982) and involves social understanding. We already discussed the visual cliff experiments (see section 2.2) as an important example of embedded action in the reality of social understanding. For the present RTG, new experimental studies using the visual cliff paradigm are planned to investigate in more detail the role of (a) the affective state and the familiarity of social interaction partners and (b) of the expectation violation of the child in the process of social understanding, decision making and acting. In this PhD project, it can be tested whether and how infants regulate their emotions and initiate their behavior in accordance with their social interaction partners, i.e. whether a parent, a sibling, a friend or an anonymous person is involved. The aim is to clarify the importance of social partners and their signals for decision-making and action. The following questions will be investigated: 1. How does the familiarity and affective state of the social partner influence the (regulation) behavior of infants? 2. How does expectation violation of the social partner influence the (regulation) behavior? The results are expected to inform a theory of social understanding (collaboration with project 8) concerning the influence of situations (e.g. visual cliff) and persons involved (e.g. familiar versus unfamiliar persons).