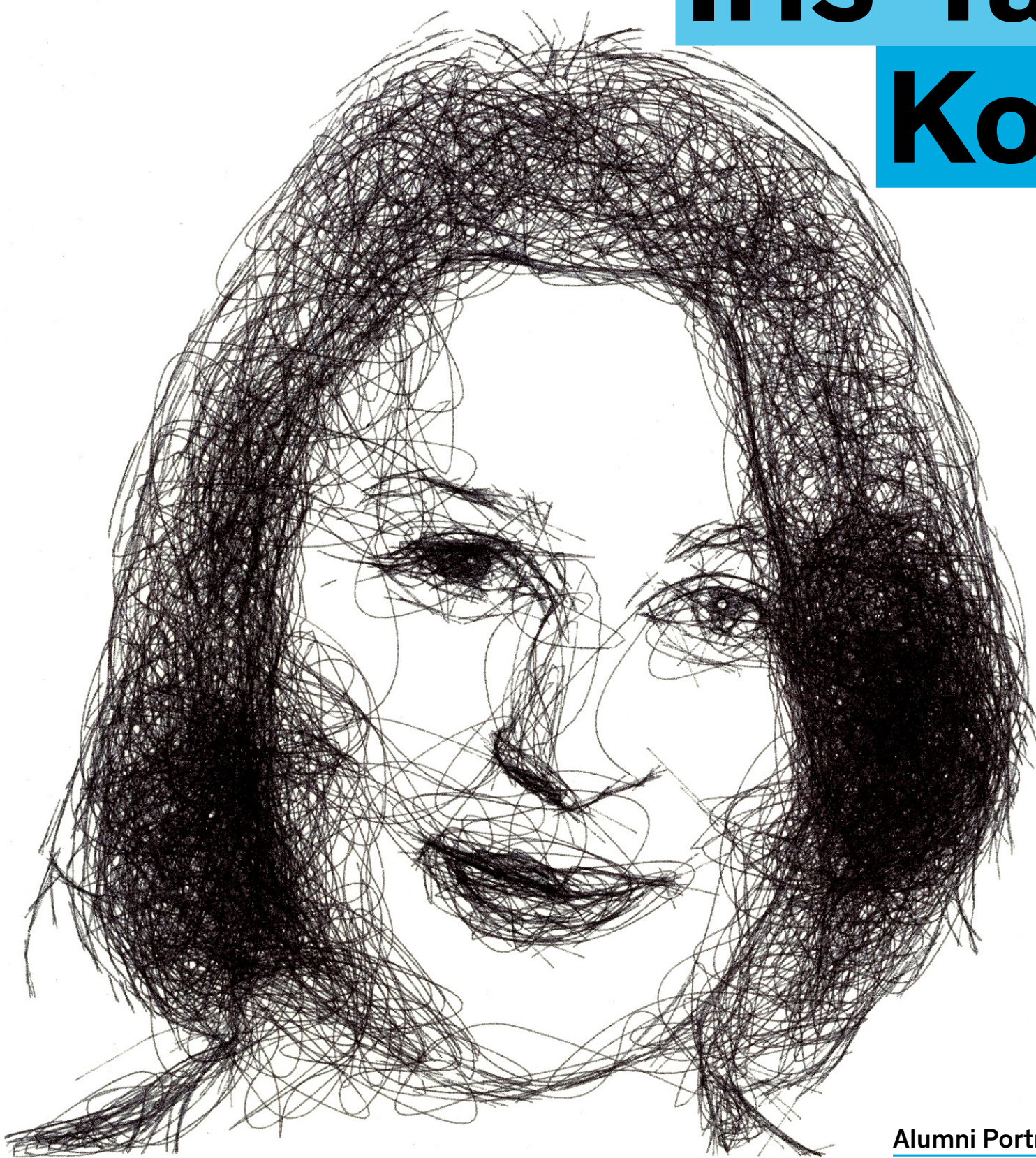


Alumna Iris-Tatjana Kolassa



Alumni Portrait Nr. 02–2017

Iris-Tatjana Kolassa



“Ever since I was a child, I wanted to become a scientist.”

When asked whether she would pursue her career the same way again, Iris-Tatjana Kolassa laughs: “Starting a professorship with two young children – twins no less – is not easy. It takes a great deal of commitment and determination. But yes, I would do it all again!”

Today, Iris-Tatjana Kolassa is a professor of psychology at Ulm University. Prior to taking up the position, she was an Emmy Noether Grant-holder in Konstanz and a Fellow of the Zukunftskolleg. Reconciling a scientific career with maternity leave can be complicated, but the Zukunftskolleg was a great help when she was about to have her twins. It financed scientific retreats, where she could discuss with her team the best way to organize her leave and how they should continue working during her absence. The Zukunftskolleg also helped to organize day care for her children.

Although not from an academic family, Kolassa says that as a child, she “always wanted to be a scientist.” Her father and grandfather both worked in pharmaceutical research, and at school she focused on chemistry. Eventually she decided to study psychology in Konstanz, because she wanted to do something entirely different, something that was new in her family. After getting her degree, Kolassa transferred to Jena University for her PhD, a decision in favour of her relationship. Originally, she had wanted to go to the Forschungszentrum Jülich but it was too far away from her partner. For Iris-Tatjana Kolassa, “family is just as important as your career, or even more so.”

When she returned to Konstanz after her PhD, Iris-Tatjana Kolassa became a Fellow of the Zukunftskolleg, “one of the best places to do research in Germany.” With the Fellowship came additional resources.

Start-up funding for projects is something she especially misses now: “I still like to start small and see how it evolves. With small grants from the Zukunftskolleg, we had a chance to initiate projects and be a little more daring about it. I’d like to have something similar where I am now.”

Kolassa also liked the exchange between the Fellows and their disciplines. In fact, she has adopted a similar approach to her own research, and is regularly collaborating with other disciplines in order to find answers to new research questions which cannot be answered within one discipline. In 2012, the Association for Psychological Science awarded her the Janet Taylor Spence Award for Transformative Early Career Contributions, a prize that distinguishes novel and creative approaches to psychological research. She received the award not least for her “keen and sustained interest to cross the the borders between scientific disciplines and to engage in interdisciplinary collaboration in order to tackle novel and challenging scientific problems”, as one reviewer put it.

Iris-Tatjana Kolassa’s research focuses on the interface between psychology and molecular biology, resulting in the interdisciplinary field of biomolecular psychology. Originally she wanted to go into brain research using imaging techniques, such as functional magnetic resonance tomography (fMRT). She eventually realized that many limits still existed to understanding the brain and therefore changed direction in her research. Today she focuses on how stress and trauma influence the body as a whole, not just the brain, but even down to the molecular level. She began collaborating with Professor Bürkle and his molecular toxicology group in Konstanz, which led to a publication in 2013. “I mentioned the aging process in trauma patients, how they look so much older,

and he said his team was looking into changes in DNA due to aging processes.” Not only did they show that traumatic stress has an effect on the integrity of the DNA of immune cells likely due to increased oxidative stress and inflammation, but also that damage could be decreased by psychotherapy. These are still among her favourite findings.

Iris-Tatjana Kolassa was inspired by her time in Konstanz and says she was influenced in a very positive way. The University of Konstanz promotes young scientists, while giving them the autonomy they need to follow their own paths. She found a mentor in professor Thomas Elbert, which she says is important. “Find a good mentor, somebody who is great, and helps you to become great as well.” Other than that she does not like to give strict advice to junior researchers. “I prefer not to say how things have to be done in order to be successful. If you like what you’re doing, then you’re good at it – and that leads to success.”

Distinctions and Awards

- 2015** Silver Gaming Award, PIAGET Research Society for Applied Research
- since 2012** Fellow of the Association for Psychological Science, USA
- 2012** Science Award of the City of Ulm
- 2012** Janet Taylor Spence Award for Transformative Early Career Contributions to Psychological Science, Association for Psychological Science, USA
- 2009** **Emmy Noether Grant**[†]
- 2008** DeGPT research award from the Falk von Reichenbach Foundation, German Language Society for Psychotraumatology
- since 2007** Member of the Heidelberg Academy of Sciences’ WIN Kolleg [Junior Academy for Young Scholars and Scientists]
- 2007 – 2009** Funding from the Robert Bosch Foundation’s fast track programme for excellent early-career scientists
- 2006 – 2010** Fellow of the Zukunftskolleg, University of Konstanz
- 2002 – 2004** PhD grant from the Studienstiftung des deutschen Volkes [German Academic Scholarship Foundation]

Curriculum Vitae

Education

- 2004** PhD, Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences, University of Jena
“Cortical correlates of the processing of feared and fear-relevant stimuli. Evidence from event-related potentials studies comparing phobics and non-phobics”
- 2002 – 2004** PhD student under Prof. Dr. Wolfgang H.R. Miltner, University of Jena
- 2002** Diploma thesis, Department of Psychology, University of Konstanz
“The role of the hippocampus in delayed match- and nonmatch-to-sample tasks as investigated with event-related fMRI”
- 1997 – 2002** Psychology studies, University of Konstanz

Scientific career

- since 2010** Professor of Clinical and Biological Psychology, Ulm University
- 2009 – 2010** Head of the **Emmy Noether**[†] Research Group “Stress- and trauma-associated immunological changes and their effects on health”, Department of Psychology, University of Konstanz
- 2006 – 2009** Head of a Junior Research Group, Clinical and Neuropsychology, Department of Psychology, University of Konstanz
- 2004 – 2006** Postdoctoral Researcher, Clinical Psychology, Department of Psychology, University of Konstanz
- 2002 – 2004** Research Assistant, Biological and Clinical Psychology, Department of Psychology, University of Jena
- 1999 – 2000** Studies abroad and Research Intern, University of Minnesota, USA
Research Assistant, Institute of Child Development and Centre for Magnetic Resonance Research, University of Minnesota, USA