

Department of Psychology: RES Supervisor List (Autumn Term 2017/18)

If you would like to apply for a placement with any of the supervisors below, please send an application to Dr Keith May (keith.may@essex.ac.uk, RES organiser).

You should prepare your application carefully and it must include:

1. a short letter in which you explain your interest in the relevant research project and motivation for working with the researcher;
2. a one page CV.

For more details, to go: <https://www1.essex.ac.uk/psychology/careers/research-experience.aspx>



Kathryn Buchanan

There's a saying in journalism that "if it bleeds, it leads" - in other words stories of violence, tragedy, dysfunction and corruption tend to get top billing. This can sometimes lead us to feel though we're surrounded by nothing but bad news. This can have a detrimental effect on people, as negative events or emotions have been found to have a stronger and more lasting impact on individuals than positive events or emotions (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, & Vohs, 2001). Put simply, bad news can have a bad effect on us. Negative news bulletins have been found to increase sadness, anxiety and the likelihood of catastrophizing personal worries (Johnston & Davey, 1997), while media exposure to acts of terrorism can be enough to trigger posttraumatic stress symptoms, even in people who have not had direct involvement in the incident (Pfefferbaum et al, 2002; Maynard, Meierhoofer, & Miller, 2000). Moreover, bad news can skew our perception of the world, as recent figures from the Office of National Statistics indicate that 4 in 5 of UK citizens believe crime has increased, despite it actually decreasing by 6%. But what can be done about all of this? In the proposed research project, we will explore whether the effects of bad news can be counteracted with good news. In particular, the following question will be addressed: can witnessing kindness after a tragedy ameliorate the effects of a negative event? Students interested in this project will be asked to assist with collating appropriate media materials, participant recruitment, and data analysis.



Alasdair Clarke

I have research interests in visual search, psychophysics, and decision making. The visual search project aims to understand the strategies people make when searching for a difficult to find target (for example, looking for your keys on a messy desk). The psychophysics study aims to resolve an open question in the literature regarding visual crowding, the results of which will tell us whether the way the brain is organised directly affects our perception. In decision making, I am interested in simple tasks and puzzles in which naïve participants perform poorly in, despite the existence of simple optimal strategies.



Laura Filippetti

The ability to intentionally act in the surrounding environment, to express emotions and desires, and to understand other people's behaviour relies on the primary ability to define one's body as belonging to ourselves and distinguished from others. I'm interested in understanding how human beings develop an integrated sense of self that is grounded to a coherent body representation, and how different processes interact together to maintain and updated self-awareness. My current projects explore 1) the development of body perception in infants, 2) the use of new techniques to study body awareness in children, and 3) how adults integrate internal (e.g. hunger) and external (e.g. appetite) signals about the body. As a RES student, you would work with me on one of these topics and you will be involved in the recruitment and testing of participants, using behavioural, physiological (e.g. heart rate measures) or neural measures (e.g. NIRS).



Tom Foulsham

My research investigates how people perceive and pay attention to the things around them. In particular, I am interested in the neural, visual, cognitive and social processes that determine where people look and what people notice and remember when they look there. Current projects include investigating where people look in art, comics, movies and computer games.



Marie Juanchich

It is not that I don't want to help, but...

Should charities solicit donations politely, using phrases like "would you like to donate", instead of the direct "donate!"? On the one hand, our results suggest that they do not have to: polite requests do not affect the likelihood of a donation. But our results identify a subtler problem: Solicited individuals adjust their perception of the request to match their decision to donate, a phenomenon we call the Polite Wiggle Room. Individuals who do not donate rationalize their decision by judging the request as impolite or intrusive, however it is phrased. Charities must manage the long-term threat of the Polite Wiggle Room to maintain a positive image among people who do not donate.

Research goals: (1) Testing who exactly benefits from the effect (people who say yes and who can therefore maximise the psychological benefits of the donation "I donated because I wanted" or people who did not donate: "I did not donate because they were rude"). (2) Testing whether the polite wiggle room affects the perception of the charity that is making the request.

Relevant references:

Chance, Z., & Norton, M. I. (2015). The What and Why of Self-Deception. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 6, 104-107. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2015.07.008>

Pavey, L., Greitemeyer, T., & Sparks, P. (2012). "I Help Because I Want to, Not Because You Tell Me To": Empathy Increases Autonomously Motivated Helping. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 38, 681-689.



Dominique Knutsen

You probably have noticed that you don't talk in the same way depending on who you are talking to. For instance, when trying to explain what you have learnt in a cognitive psychology class, you won't explain things in the same way depending on whether you are talking to a fellow student or a friend who doesn't study psychology. For instance, you might use more scientific jargon when talking to your fellow student, because you know that he or she is capable of understanding the terms you use. This illustrates the idea that human language is highly adaptive - this idea is at the centre of my research. All my current projects seek to understand how people manage to adapt to each other as they interact, and what happens when they fail to do so. As a RES student, you would be involved in participant testing and data analysis. This should be a great opportunity for you to learn more about dialogue research and to develop your research skills further!



Veronica Lamarche

My work stems from the big question "What makes some couples more resilient in the face of uncertainty compared to others?" I am currently focused on two research questions: 1) What are the individual differences that predict relationship resilience in the face of uncertainty; and, 2) Do self-regulatory systems managing responses to uncertainty outside of the relationship influence relationship regulatory responses within the relationship.

You will have the opportunity to learn more about what makes some relationships last while others fail, as well as gain research experience with participant recruitment, setting up experiments, and collecting data. Depending on your interests, experience with data analysis may also be possible.



Vanessa Loaiza

My research interests primarily concern the interaction between working memory and long-term memory. What are the processes underlying your ability to maintain and update information from moment to moment (working memory)? Do these processes have anything to do with your ability to retrieve that information much later on (long-term episodic memory)? Moreover, do aspects of long-term memory influence working memory processes? Just how similar are working memory and long-term memory, anyway? All of the projects concern these principal research questions, and would involve testing participants on programmed experiments administered on a computer. Participants will be young (18-35) and older (63-80) adults recruited from the local community and university. All RES students for this project will be involved in participant recruitment and testing, but based on your further research interests, you may also enjoy the opportunity to learn more about programming experiments and conducting and reporting statistical analyses.



Rick O'Gorman

Do we care more about family or friends? Do women find intelligent men more attractive at some times of the menstrual cycle? Do the eyes reveal insights into how people feel about taboos? Do people look more at men or women, older or younger (are older women 'invisible')? These are some of the questions that I have studied recently with assistance from a Research Experience Student (or two or three!). This coming term, my focus will turn to two main areas, 1) altruism toward family and friends, and 2) further work on who people look at. My general research interest is in studying human behaviour as a functionally adaptive system; that is, evolutionary psychology--the study of human behaviour and cognition from an evolutionary perspective. Which project is worked on depends on what I need to prioritise, and from discussion with RES applicants.



Sheina Orbell

My research concerns the ways in which motivational and automatic processes control how people regulate behaviour. About 50% of what people do during an average day is controlled by specific automatic processes controlled by habit. Habits are acquired cue contingent responses. They free up cognitive resource and are resistant to conditions of stress or distraction. However, undesired habits also benefit from these advantages, making them very resistant to change efforts. The project you would contribute to this year concerns a new look at self harm behaviours (NSSI). These have been previously thought of as motivated actions, driven by goals. An alternative conceptualisation suggests that they may be driven by habit. Initially we are undertaking a large survey, later stages of the work will include lab based experiments. You will learn something about survey methods, qualtrics, SPSS and psychometric scales as well as learning about current theory regarding self harm.



Silke Paulmann

It has been said that 10% of misunderstandings are due to differences in opinion while 90% are due to wrong tone of voice. I am interested in the 90%. My research thus explores how we communicate emotions and social attitudes via speech. I look at both the perception of tone of voice and the way we produce it. Projects with me will focus on exploring which variables can influence how emotional and attitudinal language processing works. For instance, recent studies have explored how personality, history of alcohol abuse, language and culture background, or state of mind (e.g., stress, motivation) influence how social communicative intentions are processed.



Gerulf Rieger

My work has focused on sexual orientation: how it is organized, how it develops, and how it affects a person's life. I use a wide diversity of methodologies, ranging from self-report to assessing physiological activity in order to pursue my research. I use home videos and childhood photos to examine behavioral signals of childhood masculinity-femininity and how they predict adult sexual orientation. In another line of research, I study the association of sexual orientation with physiological sexual arousal in order to illuminate sex differences in sexual attraction. Using a different methodology, pupil dilation, I am currently conducting research that will aid in explaining how early sex and sexual orientation differences in sexual attraction patterns emerge.



Gillian Sandstrom

I am interested in social relationships and how they contribute to our well-being. In particular, I study interactions with strangers and "weak ties" (i.e., acquaintances). Why do we seem so afraid to talk to strangers when all of our friends start out as strangers? Are there times when we are afraid to talk even to people that we do know well (e.g., they get diagnosed with an illness, something traumatic happens to them)? Why is it easy to talk to some people and hard to talk to others? Why do some relationships develop, and others dissipate (i.e., How/when does a stranger turn into a weak tie, and how/when do weak ties turn into strong ties?) What are the benefits of feeling connected to others?



Miroslav Sirota

In my research, I am trying to understand how people estimate, judge, reason and make decisions in situations of uncertainty and risk, how people perform these processes "on their own" and "in the presence of the others", and how people perform these processes "in the lab" and "in the wild". My basic research interests include perceptions of verbal probabilities, statistical reasoning, and intuitive and deliberative processing. My applied research interests include uncertainty and risk communication (e.g., climate change communication, communication between patients and doctors), and diagnostic and management decision-making of doctors. The research project proposed here will focus on statistical reasoning. Students will gain experience in participants recruitment, data collection and data analysis.



Jonathan Rolison

A major focus of my research is risk taking behaviours across adulthood. Some of my research is aimed at explaining why people become more cautious in older age and whether age changes in risk taking behaviours are beneficial or harmful. My research also explores people's understanding of information about risk, and in particular, health-related risks, such as cancer risks. One of my aims in this area is to develop methods for overcoming barriers to effective risk communication. As a RES student, you would work with me on one of these topics, which would include recruiting and testing participants from the local community. You would learn about how to conduct psychology studies to answer psychological questions and how to interpret the findings of psychology studies.



Elia Valentini

My research investigates how people perceive negative valence information, how they interpret both physical and psychological events as threatening. Some keywords in my projects are therefore "threat", "pain", "anxiety", "emotion", "attention". Current projects would involve measuring subjective reports (i.e. from sensory ratings to personality questionnaires), cognitive and behavioural performance in a multisensory setting and mostly using the EEG. Students will undergo a progressive induction process from literature search and databasing, through design, data collection, analysis, and interpretation.



Loes van Dam

I'm interested in multisensory perception and goal-oriented behaviour. When we interact with our direct surroundings, e.g. picking up a cup of coffee, we appear to do so seemingly effortlessly. Yet, even such simple every-day tasks involve sensing the 3D position and orientation of the cup (sensory processing), making an educated guess whether it is currently full or empty to estimate its weight (cognitive processing), and having an idea of our own limb position and where it needs to go next (movement planning). My research investigates how the human perceptual system sorts and combines relevant pieces of both sensory and cognitive information for performing such simple goal-oriented tasks. As a RES student you would work with me on this topic and for instance recruit and test participants. You would also have the chance to learn about how to analyse and interpret behavioural data and to have a look at the programming of such experiments.
