Part I PBS Tripos
PBS 1: Introduction to Psychology
2017/18 Paper Guide

Course Organiser
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Brief Description of the Paper
This course aims to introduce a variety of theoretical and methodological approaches to the study of psychology. Through studying this course, students will develop their understanding of how the different approaches address specific topics within psychology. Topics are selected such that students without prior training in psychology will not be disadvantaged. After a brief introduction to the history of psychology, and its various sub-disciplines, a series of five broad topics will be explored. Each topic will be covered over three weeks, with research and ideas from different theoretical viewpoints being discussed and compared.

Teaching is via lectures and personal study, backed up by supervisions.

Schedule
All lectures last for one hour and take place on Mondays at 11am and Fridays at 2pm, in Mill Lane Lecture Room 1. Specific lecture information is available below and an online timetable is available on the PBS Tripos website. A revision class will be held in the Easter Term, in Week 1 on Monday at 11am.

Mode of Assessment
The course is assessed by means of a single three hour examination, testing candidate’s knowledge and understanding of the different psychological approaches to the specific topic areas covered in the course. You will be required to write three 40-minute essays from a choice of questions drawn from each specific topic area within the course (i.e. an essay on any three of the five topics). In addition, you will be required to write a single one hour essay from a selection of broader questions designed to test your ability to integrate knowledge across topic areas.

Supervision Arrangements
For many students, arrangements for supervisions will already have been made by their Director of Studies, and where this is not the case, please notify Dr Jason Rentfrow.

It is normal to have a total of six to eight supervisions, including revision supervisions in Easter term, which leaves some room for choice of topics within the course. Each supervisor for the paper is normally prepared to provide all the supervisions
necessary. Suggested essay titles for supervision are included with each set of readings in the list below.

**Introduction – Dr Jason Rentfrow**
Week 1. 6th October.

**Individual Differences**

**Gender – Prof Melissa Hines**
Weeks 1-2. 9th and 13th October.

**Outline**

Although girls and boys, as well as men and women, are largely similar psychologically and behaviourally, there are some areas of average difference. These lectures will discuss the nature of these differences, as well as their sizes and the factors that might cause them. A major focus will be on children’s play behaviour, which shows large gender differences, and in regard to which a range of factors, including gonadal hormones during prenatal and neonatal development, reinforcement by parents and peers, and self-socialization, have been studied and found to contribute.

**Recommended Reading**

General overview:

Additional reading:


**Suggested supervision essay titles**

- Why do some children show more gender-typical behaviour than others?
- Are sex differences in children’s play behaviour inevitable?

**Personality – Dr Jason Rentfrow**

Weeks 2-3. 16th and 20th October.

**Outline**

Individual differences in personality are perhaps one of the most fascinating yet frustrating topics studied in psychology. Fascinating because of its richness and complexity, frustrating because there’s little consensus about what personality is exactly. These lectures review some of the dominant theoretical perspectives about personality and the ways in which it is typically assessed.

**Recommended Reading**

**Books:**


**Articles:**


Suggested supervision essay titles

- What are the limitations of current conceptualizations of personality and how serious are they?
- What are three mechanisms responsible for behavioural manifestations of personality? Give examples to illustrate how the mechanisms work.

IQ – Dr Kate Plaisted-Grant
Weeks 3-4. 23rd and 27th October.

TBC

Mind & Body

Embodied Cognition - Dr Simone Schnall
Weeks 4-5. 30th October, 3rd and 6th of November.

Outline

Psychologists are increasingly interested in embodiment based on the assumption that thoughts, feelings, and behaviours are grounded in bodily interaction with the environment. These lectures will examine how the notion of embodied cognition has become influential in cognitive and social psychology. We will explore the extent to which embodied approaches enrich traditional theories. Because embodiment has emerged as a “hot topic” especially in social psychology, one goal is to critically examine whether the growing enthusiasm is justified, and whether embodied and grounded approaches might pave the way for a paradigm shift in how the mind is understood.

Overview Reading

Further Reading


Suggested supervision essay titles

- “Metaphors are the currency of thought.” Discuss.
- “Because computers do not have bodies, they will never be able to think in the same way as humans.” Discuss.

Health Psychology – Dr Jason Rentfrow

Week 6. 10th and 13th November.

Outline

Do our thoughts and feelings affect our physical health? Can ‘the right state of mind’ serve as a buffer against illness or disease? The relative new area of health psychology combines theory and research from different areas of psychology to explore the ways in which social, psychological, and biological processes interact to
affect physical health. These lectures will provide a broad overview of this research area.

**Recommended Reading**

Books:


Articles:


**Suggested supervision essay titles**

- Why don’t zebras get ulcers?
- How does psychological stress affect physical health?

**Perceiving People**

*Perception of faces - Dr John Mollon*

Week 7. 17th and 20th November.

**Outline**

Crucial to our social interaction is our ability to identify and remember faces; and crucial to our understanding of the emotional states of others is our ability to recognise facial expressions. Have special brain mechanisms evolved for these purposes? Are some people innately better at face recognition than others? The
topic of face perception will be used to illustrate several of the techniques that are used by experimental psychologists to study perception in general.

Recommended Reading

Wilmer, J. B. et al. (2010) Human face recognition ability is specific and highly heritable. *Proceedings of the National Academy USA, 107*, 5238-5241

Suggested supervision essay titles

- Do we have dedicated brain mechanisms for the recognition of faces?
- What is the evidence that individual differences in the ability to recognise faces are heritable?
- What is known of the processes underlying the recognition of faces? Are they different from those underlying the recognition of other objects?

Interpersonal Perception – Dr Jason Rentfrow

Week 8. 24th and 27th of November.

Outline

How do individuals form impressions of others and are those impressions? This question is at the heart of research on interpersonal perception and will be the focus of this lecture series. In particular, we will explore the processes through which individuals form impressions of others and the factors that influence impression formation.

Recommended Reading

Books:

Articles:
Langlois, J. H. et al., (2000). Maxims or myths of beauty? A meta-analytic and

Suggested supervision essay titles

- Describe using illustrative examples three parameters that shape our impressions of others’ personalities.
- Is it important that we have accurate impressions of others’ personalities?

Lent term

How Individuals Construct Reality

Social & Cognitive Development: Infancy – Dr Susam Imrie
Weeks 1 and 2. 19th, 22nd, and 26th of January.

Outline

Infancy is a period characterised by rapid change, growth and development, but which factors shape and influence this process? What skills do infants bring to social interactions? How do parents influence infant play, cognition and social development? This lecture series will examine social and cognitive development during infancy, with a focus on infants’ capacities and limitations in early social interactions, the influence of parents on infant development, and the formation of attachment relationships and their relation to later social and cognitive outcomes.
Recommended Reading


Suggested supervision essay titles
- In what ways do babies seem equipped to master the world they encounter after birth and how do their experiences promote their further development?
- What are three factors that might affect the quality of interactions between parents and infants?
- Does attachment quality depend on the mother?
- When examining attachment, is it necessary to consider temperament?

Social Cognition – Dr Sander van der Linden
Weeks 2 and 3. 29th January, and 2nd and 5th of February.

Outline

Social cognition is an exciting area within psychology that explores how people judge, process, and retrieve information about other people and social situations. In these lectures, we’ll look at how individuals form impressions about other people, how we evaluate accuracy and biases in human social perception, and assess emerging evidence of cross-cultural variation in basic social cognition.

Recommended Reading


Suggested supervision essay titles

- How “accurate” are people’s impressions of the social world? Discuss the case for and against using illustrative examples.
- Discuss the evidence for cross-cultural variation in basic social cognition.
- Is human cognition inherently “social”? Discuss.
Cognition and Emotion

Neuroscience of Decision Making – Dr Paul Bays

Weeks 3 and 4. 9th, 12th, and 16th of February.

Outline

Understanding how we make decisions is a central goal of cognitive psychology and neuroscience, whether as simple as deciding to scratch an itch or as complex as choosing a second-hand car. In these lectures we will first explore the neuroscience of simple decisions, including an examination of the compatibility of free will with deterministic brain mechanisms. We will examine the neural pathways underlying reward and decision-making, and what goes wrong when these areas are damaged. Finally, we will address rationality: how can complex decisions be made optimally based on imperfect information, and to what extent do humans follow these rational rules?

Recommended Reading


Suggested supervision essay titles

- What can neuroscience experiments tell us about free will?
- What have we learned from lesion studies about the role of prefrontal cortex in decision making?

Emotion - Dr Simone Schnall

Weeks 4-5. 19th, 23rd, and 26th of February.

Outline

What is an emotion? Psychological researchers have pondered this question ever since William James asked it in the title of his article published in 1884. The current lectures will review contemporary research addressing a number of issues within the broad themes of affect, emotion and mood. In particular, we will examine multiple perspectives on emotions, including the universality of emotion, prototype approaches, and appraisal theories of emotions. We will also explore the relationship between cognition and emotion, and the extent to which cognitions are a prerequisite for emotional experiences, and on the flip side, the extent to which emotions influence cognitive processes. Overall, the lectures will illustrate that although
emotional experiences sometimes seem to disturb everyday functioning, recent research has demonstrated that many emotions have adaptive consequences.

Overview Readings:


Further Readings:


Suggested supervision essay titles:

- Is it true that “Preferences need no inferences”?
- Are emotions universal?
- Does affect help or hinder with regard to cognitive processing?
Political Decision Making – Dr Lee de-Wit

Weeks 5, 6, and 7. 2\textsuperscript{nd}, 5\textsuperscript{th}, 9\textsuperscript{th}, and 12\textsuperscript{th} of March.

Outline

One of the most important decisions we make in life is political – who should we vote for? For decades psychology has been helping us to understand how we make political decisions, and has revealed (perhaps surprising) individual differences associated with the decision to identify with one political party or another. Experimental research has also revealed a range of potential biases that complicate, or perhaps even undermine the democratic process, from the influence of the perceived competence of the face of different candidates, to the order of candidates on the ballot paper.

This series of lectures will question whether we make rational political decisions. Perhaps more critically it will explore whether reason (or emotions or morality) should dominate our political decisions, and whether the dichotomy between reason and emotion is a false one. In particular it will explore the individual differences that might cause people to emphasize different moral values in voting one way or another, and the way in which those differences might have been shaped by evolution or culture.

In recent years, there has also been an increasing recognition that policy makers can make the most of (perhaps exploit…) the biases and heuristics (and morals and emotions) in human reasoning to ‘nudge’ people into making ‘desirable’ decisions. This recognition has manifested in the UK in the development of the Behaviour Insight Team, and the fact that one will now find a ‘behavioural scientist’ in almost every department in Whitehall. This series will end by considering whether policy makers can use psychological theories and research methods to nudge our decisions ‘for good’.

Overview Reading


Further Reading


Suggested supervision essay titles
- Are political decisions essentially moral decisions?
- Are emotions information in political decision making?
- Can psychological research enable policy makers to ‘nudge for good’?
- Do our psychological biases undermine or enable the democratic process?

Easter term

Revision Session – Rentfrow et al.
30th April.