Year 4 Psychology: Provisional Course Guide, 2009-2010

Block 1

Critical Social Psychology (Dr S Widdicombe)

The course is divided into four sections. The first, concerned with Crises in Social Psychology, will introduce three main ‘crises’ within Social Psychology which we will trace in their early and more recent forms. These are the paradigm crisis (relating to methods), the conceptual crisis (individualism and the concept of self), and the moral/political crisis (relating to power and psychology’s effects). In Part Two, some critical tools are introduced (studies of science, the turn to language, poststructuralist thought). These arguments will be put to use in mounting a more thorough critique of social psychology in Part Three where social psychology will be deconstructed (taken apart, to see how it works). This will include an examination of the history and politics of the emergence of modern psychology; how psychology contributed to the government of individuals’ lives; and the dependence of knowledge on discourse and writing techniques. Finally, the assumptions about the self that underpin psychological theory and research will be examined and questioned. Part Four addresses issues such as the possibility of a postmodern (discursive or political) social psychology, and the limitations of discourse analysis. Alternative concepts of self, and the possibility or desirability of a non-cognitive social psychology will also be discussed.

Psycholinguistics of Language Production (Dr H. Branigan)

Language production is a deceptively complex task. In this option, we will consider how people are able to rapidly retrieve and combine words to form grammatical utterances, both with and without the presence of a listener. We will begin by considering the fundamental processes that are involved in producing utterances. We then focus on how these processes might be affected by the presence of a listener, by examining current research on language production in dialogue.

Clinical Neuropsychology: A cognitive perspective (Dr S. Abrahams)

This option examines the clinical neuropsychological assessment of a selection of focal neuropsychological disorders. The pattern of cognitive dysfunction in disorders such as semantic dementia, frontal lobe syndromes, amnesia and Alzheimer’s Disease will be studies and explained using cognitive models of memory, semantic organisation and behaviour control. In addition the option will examine how the study of focal neurological disorders has helped to develop our understanding of normal cognitive systems and processes.

Mind, Body and Consciousness (Dr. B. Lee)

The course begins with an introduction to human consciousness and synopsis of the so called ‘hard problem’ of intentional, first person, experience. It proceeds to examine the notion of the ‘ghost in the machine’ through a linguistic deconstruction of consciousness and its related concepts. The course assumes that something ineffable survives deconstruction and examines notions of embodiment, the lived experience, and intersubjectivity. The status of the unconscious is assessed and finally the possibility of a transpersonal epistemology is considered drawing from readings in analytical and positive psychology.

Frontal Lobe Functions (Dr. S. MacPherson)

The course will provide an overview of acquired deficits following damage to the frontal lobes of the brain. Evidence predominantly from neurological patients but also functional neuroimaging of healthy individuals will be related where possible. Specific areas include disorders of attention, executive function, memory and social cognition that arise after lesions in specific regions of the frontal lobes. Different theoretical views of frontal lobe function will also be discussed such as the supervisory system model and the somatic marker hypothesis.
Psychological Testing: Methods, Problems and Applications (Dr E. Austin)

This course will cover the construction and use of psychological tests, including an examination of some problematic areas in psychological measurement and in the interpretation of test results. The use of psychological tests in research and applied settings will be described, with a particular focus on research in personality. The course will be focused primarily on concepts in psychometrics and individual differences research rather than detailed statistics, but some ability to deal with statistical ideas is required.

Block 2

Parapsychology (Dr. C. Watt)

The course assumes that most students have had little or no previous exposure to research in parapsychology. Parapsychology is the scientific investigation of apparent new means of communication or influence between the organism and its environment. It includes the study of "psi" (extrasensory perception, precognition, and psychokinesis) and "pseudo-psi" (e.g. deception, self-deception, cognitive biases). The option introduces the history and terminology of experimental parapsychology; pros and cons of different research strategies; experimental procedures in extrasensory perception and psychokinesis research; methodological considerations for experimental design, for minimising error, leakage, artefact and fraud; questions of replication and meta-analysis; findings in extrasensory perception and psychokinesis research, focusing on ganzfeld, random number generator, and direct mental interaction with living systems research; the measurement and theories of belief in the paranormal; phenomenology of paranormal experiences; theories of psi; and methodological and metaphysical implications of parapsychology.

Basic Tendencies of Personality (Dr A. Weiss)

This course will cover theoretical models of personality and empirical studies of basic personality. The course will include animal personality; cross cultural studies of personality; behaviour genetics; life-span development and evolution of personality.

Visual Attention (lecturer tbc)

Attention plays a critical role in current theories of human visual perception and visual cognition. This course will consider the role of attention in visual encoding, visual memory, visual representation, and visual experience. Topics to be covered include the distinctions between covert versus overt attention, space- versus object-based attention, and visual versus spatial attention. Phenomena and experimental paradigms to be discussed include attentional cueing, visual search, the attentional blink, change blindness, inattentional blindness, attentional capture, and the relationship between attention and eye movements. The function of attention in complex tasks such as reading and scene perception will also be discussed. These issues will be considered from the perspectives of both cognitive theory and neural implementation drawing on a variety of empirical approaches including behavioural methods (e.g., psychophysics and chronometrics) and neuroimaging.

Causes and consequences of personality (Prof. T. Bates)

This course will cover how our personalities can affect our lives in terms of our behaviour and mental well-being. The course will cover how our personality affects our pursuit of goals and rewards; personality disorder and psychopathy; personality and emotional disorders; and subjective well-being.

Social Judgement and Decision Making (Dr. A. Lenton)

This challenging option examines the field of judgment and decision making (JDM) as it relates to social psychological phenomena. It begins with the Lecturer providing an overview of basic issues in JDM, with the remaining classes composed of student presentations. In all, this option requires students’ active
participation—both in class and online - in order to facilitate their understanding of some interesting, relevant and even controversial issues in social judgment and decision making, including affective forecasting, social projection, evolutionary vs. socio-cultural pressures on partner preferences, criteria for measuring rationality, etc.

**Neuropsychology of Perception and Action (Dr. R. McIntosh)**

This course will provide an overview of the brain systems supporting perception of the spatial world, and controlling the movements of our bodies in space. The visual system will be used to illustrate the core principle of modularity, by which complex tasks are broken down into independent sub-tasks that can proceed in parallel. Some basic requirements for the control of skilled actions such as reaching-and-grasping will then be considered. There will be discussion of evidence that the brain systems supporting the visual guidance of action are separate from those giving rise to visual awareness, so that the view of the world available to our minds eye is not that which guides our movements. This course will draw on evidence from a wide range of research methods, with special emphasis given to the study of brain-damaged individuals with abnormalities of visual perception, attention or action (e.g. visual agnosia, visual neglect, optic ataxia).

**Children with Language Impairments (Dr. M. Donaldson)**

While the vast majority of children acquire spoken language with remarkable speed and facility, some children experience significant difficulties with language development. Such difficulties may either be associated with a more general developmental disability (e.g. autism, Down’s syndrome) or may be specific to language development (usually referred to as “specific language impairment” or “SLI”). Ultimately, an adequate theory of language development must be able to account for different/delayed patterns as well as for more typical developmental patterns. Therefore, research on children with language impairments is pertinent to a number of fundamental theoretical issues (e.g. modularity, nativism), as well as having significant practical implications for the education of these children. In this course, we will focus primarily on children with specific language impairments, but will also draw on comparisons with other groups of children. We will consider three main aspects of linguistic development (lexical, grammatical and discourse level). For each aspect, we will examine some key features of the difficulties encountered by children with language impairments and will evaluate some potential explanatory constructs (e.g. linguistic module deficits, perceptual deficits, working memory limitations, inferencing problems). In the final session, we will consider the extent to which language impairments persist, how they may impact on literacy and social relationships, and the implications for educational policy and practice, as well as for theoretical accounts.

**Block 3**

**History of Unorthodox Psychology (Dr. P. Lamont)**

This course explores the history of unorthodox psychological knowledge. Phrenology, Mesmerism, Spiritualism, Psychical Research and Parapsychology (sometimes called “Psychology’s occult doubles”) have been controversial areas in the history of Psychology. But why were they so controversial, and what were the controversies really about? We will consider key historical and conceptual issues in Psychology by examining the disputes over scientific status, the various attempts by both sides to convince the scientific community and the public, and the role of the mesmerists, mediums and mindreaders who demonstrated extraordinary psychological abilities.

**Human Working Memory (Prof. R. Logie)**

The aim of this course will be to examine the concept of Human Working Memory, viewed as the means by which we hold information on a temporary basis and manipulate and transform that information. The course will cover the major theoretical perspectives and the experimental evidence that has contributed to
those perspectives, drawing on behavioural studies of healthy adults and children, of adults with impairments of working memory following brain damage, and recent research using brain imaging techniques. Using both student-led presentations and small group discussions as well as examples in lectures, there will also be an examination of the role of working memory in everyday cognition.

**Visual Memory (tbc; lecturer tbc)**

This course examines how human observers create, store, and employ memory representations of visually experienced objects, scenes, and events. Although the term “visual memory” sounds as though it refers to unitary line of scientific enquiry, research in the area varies tremendously across the time scales, stimuli, and scenarios of interest. While some researchers are interested in memory for events in the distant past, other researchers’ investigations are restricted to memory for visual experiences that occurred no more than 500 ms ago. While some examine memory for simple features, others consider memory for entire scenes. While some are interested in memory for specific events, others are interested in how memory for those events can be mentally manipulated to support future action and reasoning. While some are interested in the veridicality of visual memory, others are interested in the susceptibility of memory to various errors and distortions. The course will bring together these separate strands of research and present the state-of-the-science in areas of visual memory research including objects, faces, locations, scenes, events, and mental images.

**Childhood Autism and Related Neurodevelopmental Disorders (Dr. M. McGonigle)**

This course provides an overview of the psychological issues and contemporary psychological research related to Autistic Spectrum Disorders. It provides an introduction to autism from a general diagnostic and neuropsychological perspective, an exploration of the many ways in which autism can present itself (with videotaped examples), and an account of the main prevailing theories as to how and why children with autism have abnormal developmental trajectories.

**Sentence Processing and Psycholinguistics (Dr P. Sturt)**

When we encounter a written or spoken sentence, what kinds of processes do we use to understand its meaning? This course aims to answer this question in the light of evidence from a wide range of experimental techniques, including eye-tracking, EEG recording and reading time measurement. Questions that will be covered are all current topics under debate in the literature, and they include: What is the role of prediction in sentence processing? How do children and adults differ in the way they process ambiguous sentences? How does sentence processing interact with the working memory processes? To what extent do we follow grammatical rules when we interpret a sentence?

**Psychological Therapies (Dr. E. Sutton)**

Clinical Psychologists adhere to a Scientist-Practitioner model and use the empirical evidence base of outcome research in the application of treatments for people in distress. This option examines the evidence for the process and outcome of the psychotherapies; cognitive-behavioural, psychodynamic and interpersonal.

**Visual Cognition (tbc; lecturer tbc)**

This course examines how human observers create, store, and employ representations of objects and scenes. The overarching theme of the course is that humans are active perceivers of the world rather than passive recipients of visual information. From this vantage point, the course explores the processes that underlie visual selection, eye movement control, the deployment of attention, and memory for objects and scenes.