Welcome to the School of Psychology Newsletter, Summer 2019

Welcome to the summer edition of the School of Psychology newsletter for 2019. Although we are still waiting for the full strength of the Scottish summer weather to arrive, the campus is already in bloom, with the university’s very own Cruickshank Botanical gardens proving a delightful backdrop for a spot of lunch, some study, or just a break. This year the School of Psychology itself has seen one of our largest ever cohorts of students complete their final exam diet and while it has been a very demanding semester, it is also highly rewarding to see so much hard work pay off.

This edition of the newsletter starts by highlighting some of the grant success recently enjoyed by our staff and students (p. 2), before featuring an article about Paul Tobin, one of our current PhD students (p. 4). Paul’s research explores how nonverbal behaviour can help facilitate awkward conversations. We also introduce some new staff (p. 5), celebrate the success of our prize-winning students (p. 8) and highlight a number of student-centred events that have taken place in and around the School over the last 6 months (p. 9). Finally, we feature recent publications and other accomplishments from members of staff (p. 10).

We have recently enjoyed the pinnacle of any academic year – graduation. This year the university hosted the event in a marquee and fortunately the weather cooperated! At the Psychology graduation ceremony, I had the honour of acting as the Promotor of Graduands. Despite stumbling through the Latin (according to tradition, all degrees at Aberdeen are conferred in Latin!) it was an occasion of great pride as I watched the people I’ve worked alongside for a number of years, realise the benefits of their hard work and dedication to pursue a degree in Psychology. For me, this is what the privilege of working in a university is all about. So, on a departing note, I wish all our graduating students a sincere and hearty congratulations and remind them that now is the time to do great things.

Dr Lynden K. Miles, Director of Communications.
Experiencing myself through you: Self-agency in social interaction
Dr Bert Timmermans talks about how perceptions of self- and other-agency are intertwined in our daily lives

In a Carnegie Trust Research Incentive Grant that started in June, we look at “social agency,” that is, sense of agency in human-human interaction. “Sense of agency” refers to how much we think we were the cause of something happening. If I kick a ball, the ball moves, and I know it’s because I kicked it. Sometimes it breaks down though: in a lift, we all know the “close doors” button that we push, and then sometimes the doors close, but it takes some time and we’re never really sure whether the doors closed because we pushed that button, or whether they were going to close anyway. This has an effect on our time perception of cause and effect: when we think our action has caused the effect, we perceive the time between those two to be shorter than it actually was! Similarly, when we don’t see a link between our action and the effect, we see the time between them as longer than it was. This is called “intentional binding” and we can use it to measure sense of agency implicitly (without explicitly asking people to judge how “causal” they felt): we ask people to estimate the time between their action and an effect, and the more this estimate is shorter than the actual time, the stronger the sense of agency is.

Most research on sense of agency has been on human-computer interaction of some sort, and very few people have looked at how we feel when the outcome of our action is someone else’s reaction to us, that is, social agency. A computer is reactive, most of the time it just responds to our actions, whereas another human is an independent agent themselves, and possesses agency (control over their actions). How would the agency of someone else influence our own sense of agency?

In this project we look at whether our sense of agency differs when we think we’re interacting with someone else, as compared to an algorithm, and in particular whether our subjective sense of time between our own actions and that of someone else lengthens or shortens. A crucial question is whether this is a top-down process, whereby the simple belief that the other is a person is enough to alter our sense of agency, or whether more bottom-up processes play a role, whereby, irrespective of whether the other is a person, a complex enough system with multiple action options and hence a perceived decision making process, will alter our sense of agency.

The Carnegie Trust RIG “Experiencing myself through you: Self-agency in social interaction” was awarded to Bert Timmermans and Rama Chakravarthi, with Crystal Silver as Research Assistant on the project. More info on sinclab.org.

FIND OUT MORE: https://www.abdn.ac.uk/psychology/people/profiles/bert.timmermans

Experiencing myself through you: Self-agency in social interaction

Four Grants

The form and function of variability in choice behaviour
Dr Amelia Hunt tells us about her recent EPS-funded project

There is an intuitive similarity between a rat making decisions when navigating a maze and the choices we humans make when moving our eyes to different objects in our visual environment. With this EPS small grant, we plan to develop a paradigm to conceptually replicate observations made in experiments conducted on rats in the 1930’s, but in human eye movements during search. Rats show persistent variability in how they move through mazes over repeated trials. This variability may function to prevent animals from getting “stuck in a rut” and instead to revisit and explore all possible choices and their consequences. We think a similar drive towards variability may exist in human choices as well. To test this, we will present human participants with a set of coloured shapes to fixate according to an underlying “rule”, which they must discover and exploit (e.g. fixate blue shapes, fixate red circles, etc). This approach will allow us to quantify how quickly people discover rules, and how consistently they then follow them. We can then measure how people respond to inconsistent and dynamic rules. The hypothesis is that behavioural variability supports the discovery of new rules and adaptation to rule changes. This same variability will also limit success when the rule is eitherunchanging or works most, but not all, of the time. It will be especially interesting to see if people can flexibly increase or decrease their variability according to whether it is beneficial in a given context.

FIND OUT MORE:
www.abdn.ac.uk/psychology/people/profiles/a.hunt

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FIND OUT MORE:
www.abdn.ac.uk/psychology/people/profiles/a.hunt
Age differences in gaze following in naturalistic social scenes

Igne Umbrasaite: EPS summer internship

Older adults are less likely than young to attend to eyes in images of faces, and to follow the eye gaze direction of other people. Gaze following is usually measured using computer tasks which presents only faces with the eye direction manipulated. Recent reviews have criticised the artificial nature of the gaze cueing task, and argued that richer visual contexts are needed to model social attention. There are no studies to date which look at age differences in gaze following in realistic pictures of naturalistic scenes. Igne will be working on a project looking at whether younger and older people differ in attention to social elements of a complex scene, using eye-tracking to investigate the locus of attention.

The first task for Igne is to create, select and pilot some appropriate scene stimuli including younger and older people. The second aim is to develop and run a visual search task and free-viewing scene task in 20 younger and 20 older participants. We will test whether age differences in attention to eyes and gaze following are found when viewing naturalistic scenes using eye-tracking. Measures of fixation to the face in the scene and the gazed-at object will be taken. This project is in collaboration with Prof. Louise Phillips, Prof. Ben Tatler, Dr Eunice Fernandes, Dr Gillian Slessor and another student, Bianca Bianciardi.

FIND OUT MORE: www.abdn.ac.uk/psychology/index.php

Investigating the Microstructure of Human Visual Fields

Dr Jasna Martinovic, Dr Rama Chakravarthi and Dr Josephine Reuther UK-USA Partnering Award Programme

The process of seeing the world only begins with our eyes. The light that falls on the back of our eyes (the retina) has to be processed extensively by the brain for us to perceive the world around us. This processing occurs over multiple stages. In an ongoing BBSRC funded project, we are investigating how the different levels of visual processing relate to each other and how this relationship changes with ageing.

In a recent exciting development, BBSRC has funded a complementary project that allows us to collaborate with Prof Daniel Coates, at the University of Houston, Texas, to conduct studies using a fascinating new approach. This approach is inspired by precision techniques developed for Earth-bound telescopes to cancel out the eddies and turbulences present in the atmosphere in order to get a crisp and clear image of the sky (in a sense, they are like noise cancelling headphones). The same ‘Adaptive Optics’ can be used to get a clear picture of the inside of the eye and to target specific and precise regions of the retina to test our hypotheses. The accompanying figure, adapted from one of Prof Coates’ publications, shows a schema of how adaptive optics can be used for vision research. As part of this BBSRC project, Dr Reuther will travel to Houston next June (2020) and work with Prof Coates for three months to examine how different levels of visual processing react to objects being presented to specific receptors in the eye (‘cones’) that are sensitive to different wavelengths. Different types of cones help us to see different colours and have different roles in allowing us to see objects and shapes. Here we will assess the contributions of these cones to various levels of visual processing. Dr Reuther will also help set up EEG equipment in Prof Coates’ lab, which will enable us to directly study how brain responses change with stimulation of different cones. Subsequently Prof Coates will visit our lab here in Aberdeen to share his expertise. Additionally, we plan to work with Prof Coates to test patients with Age Related Macular Degeneration (ARMD) with this new approach to determine how such disease affects cone-dependent visual processing. ARMD is a common condition where the most sensitive part of the eye degenerates with advancing age and hence needs to be understood and tackled. The current project is a step towards a deeper understanding on the perceptual and neural consequences of ARMD.

FIND OUT MORE: www.abdn.ac.uk/psychology/index.php
A PhD Story: body language and everyday communication

Paul Tobin, PhD student, explains how nonverbal behaviours could facilitate decoding hidden messages during indirect communication.

Good communication benefits every facet of our lives; successful careers, good interactions with friends, families, partners as well as building new relationships. A major challenge we face when communicating is expressing and deciphering messages which are unclear or ambiguous.

Consider the following scenario. Your best friend has been working on a presentation for months, you attend her presentation, but unfortunately your friend messes the whole thing up. After the presentation she has no idea how it went, so she comes to you and asks excitedly “So, was my presentation good?”

This is somewhat of a social dilemma. You don’t want to lie, but you also don’t want to hurt your friend’s feelings, so what do you do?

You need to communicate that it wasn’t a good presentation without directly saying it was bad. One way to achieve this is to be indirect. Indirectness is a communicative strategy we use to be polite or save-face of our conversational partner. So how do we communicate indirectness, and how do we recognise when someone is being indirect towards us?

Previous research has shown that when we try to be polite, we trade clarity for ambiguity in our spoken language to come across as more polite. We do this using uncertainty terms, instead of saying “Your presentation was bad” you might say “Maybe your presentation could have been a bit better.” However, communication is not restricted to the words we say. A large part of what we communicate is done through our nonverbal behaviours (NVB).

My research aims to investigate what NVB are important cues to recognise when someone is being polite towards us.

We conducted experiments in which people took part in face-to-face conversations around topics which required one person to ask an awkward question (e.g. “how was my presentation?”) and one person to try give a polite/indirect response (e.g. “It’s hard to give a good presentation in front of a lot of people.”).

Results from our study have shown that when people are giving a polite response, they use NVB which express uncertainty. These uncertainty NVB include palm-reveal gestures, shoulder shrugs, tilting of the head, facial shrugs and averting of eye gaze. We conducted further experiments to investigate if people were able to make use of these uncertainty NVB when trying to recognise if someone was being polite. We found that people were able to identify an indirect response based on NVB alone. This suggests that NVB are important for comprehending an indirect message.

Following this, we designed an experiment which compared how well people could identify an indirect message under two different conditions. In one condition people had only verbal information, in the second people had both verbal and non-verbal information. Results showed that when a response was vague in terms of the spoken message, having non-verbal cues significantly helped people to determine whether that response was indirect.

I am entering the final months of my PhD and my aim is to continue and develop my research in social psychology focussing on verbal and nonverbal communication. When I’m not working on my research, I’ll be playing football relatively well or the guitar relatively poorly.

FIND OUT MORE:
If you would like more information about my research conducted under the supervision of Dr. Mingyuan Chu, please contact me at r02pt16@abdn.ac.uk

Paul Tobin
Introducing Teaching Fellows

Dr Clare Kirtley gained her PhD from the University of Dundee in 2015. The focus of her research was the interactions between action and perception, and how task performance and preparation might impact memories of an event. Clare explored these aspects using a combination of lab-based and mobile, real-world eye tracking. After completing her PhD, she worked as a post-doctoral researcher on an ESRC grant with Professor Ben Tatler at the University of Aberdeen, looking at how readers navigate and understand word-image combinations in media such as comics and graphic novels.

She is currently employed at the University as a Teaching Fellow, working across all years of study, as well as co-ordinating the PAL scheme run by the students in Psychology.

Outside of the school, Clare is interested in art and drawing, particularly in the context of comic creation, which ties nicely into her research interests!

Dr Zeshu Shao joined the School of Psychology in October 2018. She is mainly involved in teaching and supervising activities across undergraduate and postgraduate programmes in the School.

Zeshu received her PhD in Experimental Psychology from Radboud University and Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics in 2013, and she then worked as a Research Staff at Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics. In general, her research focuses on the mechanism accounting for the universality and variability at different levels of the language system, and the interplay between different cognitive systems. Specifically, she is interested in individual differences in language skills, i.e. how people’s speaking and writing abilities are affected by their other cognitive functions, such as executive control and intelligence, and by other factors like educational background and social network size. She is also interested in how people speak, write, and listen in real-life contextual settings. She has used various research methods (including questionnaires, behavioural experimentation, eye tracking, and ERP) to investigate these issues.
As our second cohort of students are working to complete their clinical projects, we are beginning to reflect on the last academic year. It has been fascinating to see how the 21 students on the course this year brought with them and have continued to develop a diverse range of experiences and interests.

It has been excellent to see how the workshop format we use for the course has provided a valuable space for students to share and learn from each other’s experiences, and to make links between practical experience and theoretical underpinnings. Students told us that the workshops which focused on understanding and formulating specific clinical case examples in specialist areas (e.g. children with physical health conditions, trauma, people given a label of Borderline Personality Disorder, cancer) have been particularly interesting and beneficial.

At our recent poster session, the students presented the findings of their clinical projects so far. This year the projects include reviews, service evaluations and audits in the areas of student mental health, staff mental health, primary mental health care service delivery, acquired brain injury and gender identity.

We are delighted that two of our graduates from the 2017-2018 cohort, Jonathan Spry and Claire Douglas successfully presented the findings of their clinical projects at the NHS Research Scotland Mental Health Network Conference in Edinburgh and the local Grampian Area Applied Psychologists Annual Conference in Aberdeen. Marie Dvorokova is now a qualified NHS Psychological Therapist and is kindly going to deliver a workshop on working in primary care for the 2019-2020 cohort. Jonathan Spry is currently training to become an NHS Psychological Therapist. Claire Douglas and Breige Yorston are working in Assistant Psychologist posts locally, Caile Gordon is working in a post with Barnados developing services for children and Abby McPhail is looking forward to starting her Doctoral Clinical Training in Memphis, USA in September.

We are very pleased that our graduates are keeping in touch and keeping us updated as they continue their journeys in clinical psychology and mental health.

FIND OUT MORE:

Our Students, Doing More

BPS Conference

Thirty-seven University of Aberdeen undergraduate students attended this year’s British Psychological Society (BPS) Scotland Undergraduate Conference 2019 which was hosted at the University of the West of Scotland on Saturday March 30th. The highest submission of conference talks was from Aberdeen students and 22 were selected to present talks based on their final year dissertation project, reflecting the high standard of the undergraduate research community at Aberdeen. Free coach travel for all students who attended was provided by the School of Psychology.

The conference was attended by over 300 final year psychology students and is an annual event organised by the Scottish Branch of the BPS. The BPS lead organiser is Dr Jason Bohan (University of Aberdeen) who liaises with a different Higher Education Institution each year to host the event to ensure that this is an inclusive event for all students studying psychology in Scotland. In 2020 the conference will be held at Queen Margaret’s University in Edinburgh and we hope that many of our students will have the benefit of attending then as well.

Psychology networking event

Each year the School of Psychology hosts a networking event, with this year being the largest event yet! More than 70 employers, charities and professionals were in attendance to discuss everything career related with our students. The student attendees included undergraduates from L3, L4 and postgraduate students. The aim was to support students in finding out more about possible career avenues, along with networking and chatting with a variety of individuals, some of whom might sit on future postgraduate application panels, or interview boards (always nice to spot a familiar face in those situations!). Feedback from the event indicated that both students and professionals enjoyed themselves, with several students commenting that they felt they were now much better informed about what they could do after graduation. We would like to thank everyone who attended, and look forward to seeing many of you again next year.
Undergraduate Success

Congratulations to all of our students graduating this summer!

You have each experienced your own academic and personal journey, and have achieved more than you may know. From all of us in the School of Psychology, it has been a pleasure and you have done us proud.

Undergraduate Student Prizes 2019

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<tr>
<th>PRIZE</th>
<th>REASON FOR PRIZE</th>
<th>WINNER</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Henry Prize in Mental Philosophy (Logic)</td>
<td>Best in Level 4 Psychology</td>
<td>Laura Cowie</td>
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<tr>
<td>British Psychological Society</td>
<td>Best across Levels 3 &amp; 4 Psychology</td>
<td>Roisin Harrison</td>
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<tr>
<td>Undergraduate Award</td>
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<td>Alan B Milne Prize</td>
<td>Best Undergraduate Thesis (Psychology)</td>
<td>Sanni Ahonen</td>
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<tr>
<td>Anderson Prize</td>
<td>Best Level 3 Psychology</td>
<td>Leah Hillari</td>
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<tr>
<td>Anderson Prize</td>
<td>Best Level 2 Psychology</td>
<td>Gilliane Nopere</td>
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<tr>
<td>Anderson Prize</td>
<td>Best Level 1 Psychology</td>
<td>Janet Gauthier</td>
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Summer Research Internships

Congratulations to the following students on securing a paid research internship this summer. Good luck with your projects!

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>INTERNSHIP AWARD</th>
<th>STUDENT</th>
<th>SUPERVISOR</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Carnegie Trust</td>
<td>Kamilla Bonnesen</td>
<td>Dr Hesse</td>
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<tr>
<td>BBSRC Eastbio</td>
<td>Justin Claydon</td>
<td>Dr Chakravarthy</td>
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<tr>
<td>RANK Prize</td>
<td>Ben Lonnqvist</td>
<td>Dr Hunt</td>
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<tr>
<td>EPS</td>
<td>Igne Umbrasaite</td>
<td>Professor Phillips</td>
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<tr>
<td>Developing Scientist studentship</td>
<td>Philip Mcadams</td>
<td>Dr Benson</td>
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<tr>
<td>Developing Scientist studentship</td>
<td>Vasilena Voynikova</td>
<td>Dr Schnitzspahn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discovering Research studentship</td>
<td>Alicja Kolasinska</td>
<td>Dr Ray</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DR Research Expense Award</td>
<td>Maria Kvarving</td>
<td>Dr Schnitzspahn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School of Psychology</td>
<td>Frederico de Filippi</td>
<td>Professor Tatler</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School of Psychology</td>
<td>Leah Hillari</td>
<td>Dr Schnitzspahn</td>
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Level 4 Poster Session

In January we celebrated our final year students’ hard work with the annual Level 4 Poster Session in Elphinstone Hall. Students displayed posters of their research projects and were visited by colleagues and members of academic staff, who asked questions and engaged in scientific discussions. The posters were of a high standard, reflecting what students have learned about research in the past few years. Level 3 students also attended the event, to be inspired about potential projects next year. It was a festive, memorable occasion that is one of the high points in our academic year.

Celebrating over 30 years of ageing research at the University of Aberdeen

The School of Psychology hosted an afternoon tea event to express gratitude to the older participants who kindly regularly take part in Psychology experiments at the University of Aberdeen. Louisa Lawrie explains:

A number of staff and students in the School of Psychology rely on a large pool of older participants for their research. This event was a great opportunity to thank the older adults for taking time from their day to come in on a regular basis to participate in our studies. Without our volunteers, it would not be possible to conduct our research. For this reason, it was important to organise the event, not only to thank our volunteers, but also to share the results of the studies they had participated in. Volunteers were invited to learn more about the studies over a cup of tea and cake. Members of staff and students showcased their exciting ageing research with the aid of posters and interactive demonstrations. To the delight of the researchers, over 70 volunteers attended the event, some of whom had also participated in the very first ageing studies held at the School around 30 years ago. Along with familiar faces, new faces also attended with volunteers bringing their friends and families, leading to the reunion of old friendships.

While tea and cakes were a definite hit, the demonstrations and posters drew the biggest crowds. Everyone thoroughly enjoyed learning more about the research outputs of their voluntary work, and the different laboratories within the School. Due to the success of the afternoon tea event, the School of Psychology plan to host similar events on a more regular basis.
Public engagement and impact events

Dr Amy Irwin and Mr Gabi Lipan wrote an article for The Conversation, entitled “Students, this is how you can stand out from the crowd in a very competitive job market”, discussing the employability in Higher Education. http://theconversation.com/students-this-is-how-you-can-stand-out-from-the-crowd-in-a-very-competitive-job-market-112541

Dr Amy Irwin launched the tractor driver situation awareness checklist and as a result gave interviews to STV News, Original 106 FM, Northsound Radio and BBC Scotland Newsdrive on 23rd April. There was also an article in The Scotsman about the project: https://www.scotsman.com/news/airline-pilot-checklist-to-cut-farm-dangers-1-4913685

Dr Amy Irwin, Dr Ceri Trevethan, Dr Emma Hepburn gave a workshop, entitled “Linklater: Trollhunting, an interactive workshop discussing cyberbullying and coping techniques” on 24th May at the May Fest 2019. (right)

Ms Ilinca-Ruxandra Tone and Dr Amy Irwin led a discussion, entitled “Spot the risk! Learn more about the impact of fatigue and how to manage it” on 25th May at the May Fest 2019. (above)

Mr Oliver Hamlet, Mr Gabi Lipan, Dr Amy Irwin, and Ms Sophia-Marie Korpiun gave a talk, entitled “Star Wars workshop! Learn more about non-technical skills in the context of Star Wars.” on 26th May, at the May Fest 2019. (above)

Dr Jacqui Hutchison gave a talk at Mearns Academy (4th and 5th year pupils), Laurencekirk, titled: “How do society’s stereotypes form and change (or not change)!?” on 26th March.

Dr Jasna Martinovic gave a Café Scientifique talk on 13th March. The title of her talk is “Display Technologies: A Perspective from Vision Science”. In this talk, she discussed the current cutting-edge display technologies and how knowledge about human perception can feed into their development. (right)
Dr Jasna Martinovic held a workshop at Peacock’s Visual Arts on 25th April. The title of the workshop was “Sounds, words and meanings”. The audience could discover more about auditory perception through interactive demonstrations of sound illusions and auditory phenomena. (right)

Dr Mingyuan Chu gave a talk, entitled “Age-related differences in using and understanding sarcasm”, on 25th May at the May Fest 2019.

Funding and Awards

Ms Igne Umbrasaite Experimental Psychology Society summer internship: Age differences in gaze following in naturalistic social scenes £2000, supervised by Prof Louise Phillips

Dr Amelia Hunt Experimental Psychology Society Small Grant: The form and function of variability in choice behaviour- £3500

Dr Bert Timmermans Carnegie Trust Research Incentive Grant — “Experiencing myself through you: Self-agency in social interaction” £9957

Dr Jasna Martinovic, Dr Rama Chakravarthi and Dr Josephine Reuther won a BBSRC international partnering award entitled “Investigating the microstructure of human visual fields and generating low-vision applications”, which will be conducted with Prof Daniel Coates from Optometry at the University of Houston, USA. (£6939)

Dr Amelia Hunt was appointed as the Associated Editor of Journal of Experimental Psychology: Human Perception and Performance.

Publications

Key: Current academic staff, research fellows/assistants, postgraduates, undergraduates


Publications cont.


FIND OUT MORE:
www.abdn.ac.uk/psychology/
Keeping Up With The News
For more information about what we are up to in the School please visit our website, follow us on Facebook and Twitter, or get in touch with us via e-mail or phone.

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This newsletter was created by the Psychology Communications Team: Mingyuan Chu (newsletter officer), Lynden Miles, Rama Chakravarthi, Bert Timmermans, Doug Martin, Carolyn Porter, and Rhona Moore. Graphic design by Brad Newman.