PBS 7: Advanced Topics in Social and Applied Psychology

2019/20 Paper Guide

Course Organizer: Lee de-Wit

Aims and Objectives

• To introduce a range of psychological theories and findings used to address issues in society with the opportunity to consider certain instances in depth.
• To examine the methodological and practical challenges which face work outside the laboratory associated with successful interventions.
• To bridge the academic to non-academic divide.

Course overview - This is an advanced level paper. Areas to be examined vary from year to year. This year, lectures will focus on four domains. First the use of applied behavioural insights in addressing real world challenges such as climate change and immigration. Second the course will explore advanced topics in personality and individual differences, such as the ability to assess personality from digital footprints, the neural basis of personality, and the relationship between personality and criminality. Third the course will explore the challenges faced in translational research, in psychology and more generally, with a particular focus on conflict resolution. Forth, the course will explore the psychology of social influence, and in particular explore how digital platforms (social media) might change the nature of social influence. The paper is taught by the usual combination of lectures and supervisions. There are no practical classes.

The course is open to students on Part 2 PBS, NST and HSPS.

Lectures – Tuesdays 2-3 and Wednesday 10-11 in the Psychology Lecture Theatre (downstairs).

Structure – The course is divided into four eight lecture courses, each on a more specific theme. Students will need to select three of the four eight lecture courses for the exam.

Mode of assessment – The paper is examined by means of one three-hour unseen examination containing twelve questions. There will be three questions from each of the eight lecture topics, and students will need to pick questions from three of the four eight lecture topics.

Supervision – One to two supervisions are recommended for each of the eight lecture courses. Because lecturers teach close to their research interests, students should seek supervision directly from them; where lecturers do not supervise themselves, they will recommend others who can. The onus is on students to contact lecturers and arrange supervisions, but this is not usually necessary in advance of the lectures for that topic. It is recommended that supervisions be scheduled close to the time of the corresponding lectures: many lecturers will give details of supervision arrangements in their first lecture. Students are advised to have supervisions in at least three of the modules and are encouraged to consider a broad range of subjects.

Workload - The paper is taught by means of lectures and supervisions. There are two hours of lectures per week and no practical classes. It should occupy one quarter of a student’s time across the course of the academic year. In practice, this means that a diligent student who attends the lectures and takes the recommended 3 supervisions will probably spend 160-170 hours in private study across the eighteen
weeks of the Michaelmas and Lent Full Terms preparing for those lectures and supervisions and consolidating learning afterwards. How this time is spread across the year is a matter of personal learning style and the demands of other papers. The time spent in the Easter Term on examination preparation will depend upon the work completed across the course of the year. Students should seek the advice of their Directors of Studies if they run into difficulties planning their time.

Readings - Each lecturer on the course provides readings relevant to the particular topics that he or she covers. A summary of some of the key reading is presented below. Individual lecturers will provide additional more specialised references in the light of specific matters raised in their lectures. The lists provided are intended as a resource for you. There is absolutely no expectation that you will read everything. With the help of your supervisor, the substance of the lectures and your own interests you should focus on a subset that is relevant to you.

**Michaelmas Term**

**Topic 1 – Applied behavioural insights**

Organizer – Lee de-Wit

Times – Tues 2-3am

Overview - These eight lectures will explore in detail the application of ‘Nudge’ and Behaviour Change techniques to address real world challenges. It will explore the theoretical, ethical and philosophical basis for the application of behavioural insights, and explore several prominent theories of behaviour change. It will then explore the application of behavioural insights to a number of real world challenges, including engagement with education, improving health, improving political participation, getting people to save for their pensions, communication of immigration and tackling climate change. The role of psychological theory, such as the influence of cognitive biases, or the importance of social norms, will be critically evaluated across these different domains. The course will also reflect on some of the real world challenges in translating psychological insights into the field, and in developing evidenced based evaluations for complex policy evaluations. The course will include some guest lectures from experts working in different real world applications of behavioural insights.

Key References –


Sample Questions –
Is libertarian paternalism possible? Don’t nudges by default involve a reduction in the agency of those being nudged?

Critically evaluated whether successful nudge interventions have relied on insights from psychological research?

Will nudges always work in the same way in different cultures? Given at least one example of a nudge that should be relatively universal, and a nudge that is likely to be culture specific.

Select a real world problem involving human behaviour, and explain how you would use the BIT’s EAST framework to develop an intervention to address that problem.

**Topic 2 – Advanced topics in personality and individual differences**

**Organizer – Jason Rentfrow**

Guest lecturers - Maria Bada, Luca Passamonti, Aiden Loe and Luning Sun

**Times – Weds 10-11am**

**Overview** – For decades, psychologists have been interested in understanding the psychological basis of personality and individual differences. How should we understand differences in the ways in which people think, feel, and behave? To what extent do biological and social factors contribute to these differences? How influential are individual differences for important life outcomes? This lecture series seeks to provide an overview of the current theory and research in personality and individual differences. The lectures will touch on issues pertaining to a range of topics from how we measure personality and the neuroscience of personality, to the psychological profile of criminals and the role of personality in the workplace.

**Key References** –


**Sample Questions** –

Discuss why an individual engages in online criminal acts based on different personality theories and theories of crime.
How can personality neuroscience inform our understanding of the neurobiological roots of individual differences in behavioural traits?

Evaluate the main challenges of measuring individual differences via digital footprints.

Please use examples to illustrate what are the key characteristics of a good psychometric test.

**Lent Term**

**Topic 3 – Translational Issues in Psychology**

Organizer – David Good

Times – Tuesday 2-3pm

**Overview** – While many of the issues studied in psychology are essentially curiosity driven and seek to explain different phenomena without consideration of whether or not the advance in our understanding will be of practical utility, there is also a long tradition in both addressing problems and pathologies which society faces, and using fundamental research to create novel technologies and social practices. This set of lectures will consider certain cases where psychology has been deployed in this way, as well as the generic issues which face all aspects of translational research.

**Key References** –


**Sample Questions** –

How should we analyse the costs and benefits afforded by social media?

Compare and contrast the major influences for men and women in the transition to parenthood.

Why might our view of our self lead us to show extreme hostility to others?
Topic 4 – Influence and Persuasion in the Digital Age

Organizer – Sander van der Linden

Times – Weds 10-11am

Overview – From echo chambers and filter bubbles to fake news and post-truth, in eight lectures we will explore how social media and digital technologies have altered the basic social influence process. We will start by exploring the nature of the problem: What do we mean by “post-truth”? What are the effects of “echo cambers” on intergroup conflict and belief polarization? We will then explore how digital footprints and the viral spread of fake news and misinformation can be weaponized to influence and micro-target vulnerable populations. At the same time, the rise of big data is posing major questions about the predictive power of traditional psychological theories. In the final set of lectures we will explore what social psychological science has to offer in terms of potential solutions to depolarize online conflict and to inoculate the public against fake news and misinformation. Ultimately, we will return to our key question; has modern technology fundamentally altered the social influence process?

Key References –


Sample Questions –

Discuss and evaluate the extent to which there is empirical evidence to suggest that the spread of fake news can sway public opinion and influence voting behavior in elections?

Are our digital online footprints more predictive of human decision-making and behaviour than traditional social psychological theories?

Has modern digital technology fundamentally changed the social influence process?

Are we living in a post-truth society? Discuss the case for and against.