**University of Sussex** 

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# Psychology Research Guide

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## **Research focus**

We are one of the largest psychology departments in the UK, with an internationally recognised profile across the full breadth of psychology. ۲

Research lies at the heart of our work. Our cutting-edge research advances scientific knowledge and provides innovative approaches to key psychological challenges and issues. All our teaching faculty are research active so students at Sussex get to learn about psychology from leading experts in their field.

We are engaged in research across the broad range of the discipline. The School is organised into four research groups:

- Developmental and Clinical Psychology
- Behavioural and Clinical Neuroscience
- Cognitive Psychology

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• Social and Applied Psychology

In this brochure we have highlighted areas of our research that may have direct relevance to pre-university study. You will find further information and interactive resources about each of the following research topics at www.sussex.ac.uk/psychology/guide

A mirror stereoscope is being used to probe the limits of unconscious processing. With different images presented to each eye only one image will be consciously perceived while the other can exert an unconscious influence on behaviour

# **Developmental and Clinical Psychology**

This research groups works to build theoretical understanding of human development and clinical psychology and inform practical interventions to support cognitive, emotional and social growth. Research spans three intertwined areas: development of cognition and communication, social and emotional development, and youth mental health.

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#### Are you scared of spiders or the dark?

#### Ever wondered why a child cowers behind the sofa when they see a Dalek, or what you can do to help them to be more confident?

At the Child Anxiety Theory and Treatment Lab, Professor Andy Field and his colleagues explore how children develop emotional reactions such as anxiety and fear, what affects these reactions (personality? parents? television?), and what can be done to increase children's resilience.

#### Why worry?

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#### Ever woken up in the early hours of the morning and started worrying about something – only to find that you can't get it out of your head?

Professor Graham Davey and his colleagues have been conducting research on worry and anxiety for over 15 years. Worrying can become pathological and it is a cardinal feature of many of the common anxiety disorders, and so understanding why we worry - and more importantly why some of us can't stop worrying – is an important step in developing interventions for chronic worry. Some people believe they are "born worriers" – but they're not! Worriers aren't born that way - they've developed fixed beliefs about how important worry is, and that drives them to worry. Research at Sussex has shown that worry perseveration is often caused by a combination of negative mood (e.g., anxiety, sadness, pain, tiredness) and the goals we set ourselves when worrying (e.g., to cover every possible eventuality). This kind of knowledge provides an important foundation for effective therapeutic interventions.







Children exploring 'scary' animals at the CATTLab

# Behavioural and Clinical Neuroscience

This research group recognises the close relationships between animal, human and clinical research, and emphasises translational research that bridges across these domains. The group focuses on ageing and dementia, appetite and obesity, addictive behaviours and influences of early developmental experience on adult behaviour.

#### Memories are made of this...

#### Our memories define us – our past experiences and our future intentions. They colour our interactions with our environment and with others.

While all of us can expect our memory to decline as we age, some of us may experience more severe change leading to dementia. Such changes are partly determined by our genes but partly by our physical and psychological fitness through the lifespan. Research by Professor Jenny Rusted and her colleagues powerfully combines behavioural testing with brain imaging. Using these techniques, the research group can analyse drug effects on the brain, understand how memory changes in the ageing brain, and learn more about how gene variants that predispose to dementia also affect cognition in young adults.

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#### Drugs, brain, and behaviour

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What's wrong in the addict's brain? Why would anyone 'choose' to repeatedly and compulsively take drugs despite the aversive consequences of doing so?

Dr Crombag and his colleagues study why some people who take illicit drugs (e.g., cocaine, heroin) or legal drugs (e.g., alcohol, nicotine) become addicted to them. Research in the past decades indicates that the reasons are complex, combining genetics, biology and psychology. The research at Sussex sheds light on biological factors, such as how the brain is altered by drugs – and the consequences of these changes. Recent studies have also examined how drug-taking behavior is dependent on the physical and social environment, as well as the role played by psychological characteristics such as impulsivity.

Using a handgrip to determine how lifestyle factors such as physical exercise and diet, along with genetics and brain biochemistry affect how well we age

# **Cognitive Psychology**

This research group has wide-ranging interests in language and communication, learning, memory, attention, visual perception, and consciousness. As well as normal adult cognition, researchers in this group study both developmental issues and various pathologies. ۲

#### Are you concentrating on reading this?

Do you sometimes find yourself becoming distracted from the task you are performing – perhaps by something in the external environment ('oh look, a fire engine!'), or even your own thoughts ('I must remember to stop by the supermarket on the way home...')?

Research by Dr Sophie Forster and colleagues examines common forms of daily life distraction. Recent research has shown that the ability to ignore both external distractions and our own mind wandering draws on a common process. This ability seems to vary from person to person – although it might be expected that people who walk around with their 'head in the clouds' would be less likely to be distracted by things going on in the world around them, in fact people who are prone to mind wandering are also more likely to be distracted by irrelevant external events. Research at Sussex is helping us to understand why distraction occurs, who it affects the most, and whether it can be reduced.

#### Seeing sounds and touching sight

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#### How are the senses linked together in the brain?

There is a general belief that whilst some psychological attributes and faculties differ greatly across individuals (e.g., personality, memory), others hardly differ at all (e.g., the way we see or hear). The research in Professor Jamie Ward's lab shows this assumption to be false. Using methods from neuroscience and cognitive psychology, researchers in this lab study a phenomenon termed 'synaesthesia' in which sounds may trigger vision, or words may elicit tastes. The study of synaesthesia illustrates how the senses are not separate but are strongly linked together in the brain – for instance, what you see affects what you hear. Sussex is leading the way in research that helps us learn more about this kind of fascinating 'multi-sensory perception'.





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Some people see coloured letters spelled out when they listen to speech. The parts of the brain used for hearing may connect in unusual ways to the parts of the brain involved in seeing

# Social and Applied Psychology

This research group – one of the largest groups of social and applied social psychologists in the UK – is concerned with the attitudes and behaviour of people in their social environments. Above all, it focuses on how people's relationships – with others in their groups or with those who belong to different groups – affect behaviour, and in turn, how relationships are affected by the social context in which people find themselves.

#### Take more exercise! Eat more fruit and veg! Stop smoking! Use condoms! Apply sunscreen!

We are bombarded by warnings about the ways in which our lifestyles may damage our health. What is the impact of these warnings, and how can health messages be made more effective?

Health-related warnings can make our lives more difficult – we are surrounded by tempting food and drink, for instance – and can feel like threats to our freedom and pleasures. As a result we may ignore them and carry on as if there is no danger or it does not apply to us.

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Professor Pete Harris and his colleagues recognise that these warnings often make people feel bad. They have shown that asking them to think about some positive aspects of themselves, such as the things they value or people they love (a technique called 'self-affirmation'), can help them take steps to change. In experimental studies, young people who are asked to self-affirm before they see a health message have often been found to respond better to that message than those who are not asked to selfaffirm. They want to cut down on alcohol or cigarettes, take more exercise, use sunscreen or eat more fruit and vegetables. The research at Sussex is crucial for exploring why this works and how it can be developed for practical use.



#### How do people behave in mass emergencies? How should mass emergencies be managed?

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When we think about sinking ships, plane crashes or fires there is an image that comes to mind: 'panic'. But is this an accurate description of what really happens?

The 'panic' image conveys a number of assumptions: that people over-react, that they behave selfishly, and that their behaviour is disorderly. But, in many wellknown emergencies, we know that people displayed concern for others – including for complete strangers – and that their behaviour was orderly and organised. The evacuation of the World Trade Center during 9/11 is a good example.

Dr John Drury's research on behaviour in mass emergencies examines two questions: first, what are the psychological conditions for social (versus antisocial) behaviour in such events; and, second, how do the emergency services that respond to such events understand public behaviour in emergencies. These questions are connected, because if the authorities' perceptions of crowd behaviour in emergencies are distorted it may lead to ineffective emergency management strategies.



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Student volunteers (in orange) prepare to go through a decontamination shower as part of an emergency response exercise

For more information and interactive resources on each of the research topics featured in this brochure, please visit www.sussex.ac.uk/psychology/guide



# **Undergraduate Study**

We offer a BSc single honours degree, as well as several courses with another subject as a minor. We aim to provide an excellent grounding in the core areas of psychology and, at the same time, provide students with plenty of choice so that they can pursue their own interests and develop their own specialisms. The final year is devoted to specialist option modules and a major research project.

All our psychology degrees are accredited by the British Psychological Society, and enable you to apply for further training as a professional psychologist (the Graduate Basis for Chartered Membership).

I picked Sussex because the people at the open day seemed happy. The happy atmosphere continued when I arrived (it wasn't just an open-day façade). The lecturers make the first term simple, engaging and varied – with spaced out deadlines, amusing lectures and opportunities to participate in current research. Sussex is a good place to enjoy psychology.

Alex Casey

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### Careers

A degree in Psychology will provide you with a solid understanding of human behaviour and communication, good problem-solving skills, as well as expertise in organisation and analysis, opening up a wide choice of careers in business and in the public sector.

Our students go on to careers in various areas of professional psychology, media, advertising, market research, human resources, teaching, and business and management, as well as further study.

### Visit us

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We run a range of visit opportunities through the year, and our friendly campus will give you a chance to experience what student life is like for yourself. Visit **www.sussex.ac.uk/study/visitus** 

The University of Sussex is located at Falmer, on the outskirts of Brighton, within easy reach of London.







To find out more please visit www.sussex.ac.uk/psychology

For specific enquiries please contact **T** + 44 (0) 1273 877102 E psychologyresearch@sussex.ac.uk

www.sussex.ac.uk/psychology/guide

# Why Sussex?

#### **Excellence in Research**

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Our research has a real world impact, informs government policies and fuels media debates... which is why our research is internationally renowned.

#### **Excellence in Teaching**

You can read the books our lecturers write wherever you study... but at Sussex you can learn directly from the authors.

**Highly ranked for Student Satisfaction** We listen and respond to our students' needs... which is why Psychology at Sussex is consistently highly rated for student satisfaction.

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