

## Clinical Psychology Research Projects 2021

### **Ryan Balzan** (Lecturer in Psychology)

I am interested in why people form misbeliefs – that is, beliefs not based on objective facts or reality. Misbeliefs are relatively common and include beliefs about pseudoscience, conspiracies or the paranormal. Misbeliefs are also observed in clinical populations, for example, delusional beliefs in people with psychosis. My work has particularly focussed on the role that cognitive biases (i.e., problematic thinking styles) play in the development and maintenance of delusional beliefs in people with psychosis. I have also contributed to the development of novel psychological treatments, including the metacognitive training programme (MCT). MCT targets the cognitive biases thought to cause and maintain delusions, with the aim of reducing the severity of these symptoms.

Current projects include:

- Combining MCT with cognitive remediation programs (targeting cognitive deficits)
- Testing a new version of MCT adapted for eating disorders (either in clinical or ‘at-risk’ populations)
- Investigating the efficacy of online 'cognitive bias correction' psychoeducation programme, which may help to improve analytical thinking in the general population and reduce people's vulnerability to pseudoscience misinformation (e.g., vaccines cause autism) and 'fake news'

### **Mariëtte Berndsen** (Lecturer in Psychology)

My primary research interests involve the social psychology of emotions, stigma, and prejudice. I would like to supervise projects in the area of:

- Guilt and shame. How do people cope with these emotions (e.g., avoiding specific situations) and how can we mitigate these emotions?
- Stigma. Individuals who deviate (in negative ways) from normative standards in their behaviour and/or appearance are often stigmatized. This is especially so when they are perceived to have some control over their behaviour/appearance (e.g., obese people, people who suffer from depression). How do stigmas affect one's life and can we reduce stigmas?

### **Monica Cations** (Lecturer in Psychology)

My research is translational with an aim to improve the quality and safety of aged care. I have a particular focus on psychological wellbeing in aged care environments, young people accessing aged care, and elder abuse.

Current projects for which I am seeking students include:

- PhD project – adapting trauma-informed care for aged care settings

This translational project will use mixed qualitative and quantitative methods to evaluate implementation of an existing model of care (trauma-informed care) into a new setting (aged care). This project will suit a student interested in applied research, collaborations with industry, and building skills in implementation science (that is, how to implement effective interventions into practice).

· PhD project – mental health service use among older Australians

This project will involve using ‘big data’ to examine mental health service use among older Australians and how these services impact wellbeing and outcomes. This project would suit a student with an interest in both psychology and public health, and who enjoys quantitative data analysis.

· Master’s research project – examining impacts and coping strategies of staff at high risk for harm working in specialist dementia services

· Master’s research project – systematic review of studies evaluating implementation of trauma-informed care

· Various projects related to young people accessing aged care, including how they conceptualise their disabilities, their preferences for supports, and barriers and facilitating factors to accessing these supports.

I am happy to discuss other projects in these themes

### **Sarah Cohen-Woods (Matthew Flinders Fellow in Psychology)**

My research focuses on establishing the role of genetics and epigenetics in psychological outcomes, and how environmental risk/protective factors mediate their influence through our biology (i.e. via epigenetic change. Understanding how it is the environment interacts with our genetics to either increase or decrease risk of poor mental health). Epigenetics provides a possible mechanism by which the environment can interact with our genome.

Current projects that could be of interest to Masters and PhD students include:

- Investigating epigenetic change in context of cross-generational inheritance of childhood maltreatment (poor outcomes in children born to fathers exposed to childhood maltreatment)
- Investigating epigenetic and biological effects of interventions, and if biological changes are related to psychological change

Some of the terms and ideas may sound intimidating, particularly if you have not yet had exposure to behavioural genetic research, however I will provide information and resources for gaps in knowledge, and the appropriate support to develop required skills. Please could interested students contact me at [sarah.cohenwoods@flinders.edu.au](mailto:sarah.cohenwoods@flinders.edu.au) to discuss potential projects.

### **Michael Gradisar (Professor in Clinical Child Psychology)**

My interests lie in the aetiology, consequences and treatment of sleep disorders across the lifespan.

Current projects:

- The new diagnostic criteria for Insomnia specify that it is a diagnosis that may now apply to children. One of the most effective treatments for adult insomnia is Cognitive-Behaviour Therapy for Insomnia (CBT-i), and imbedded within CBT-I is an effective technique called Sleep Restriction Therapy. Recently we have found that Sleep Restriction Therapy can improve the sleep of school-aged children experiencing Insomnia, without significant consequences on their daytime performance (eg, aspects of the child's IQ). However, these data have been self-reported measures of sleep. An opportunity is available to objectively measure children's sleep and determine the % and amount of minutes children spend in various stages of sleep – and explore whether these relate to different aspects of their IQ. For example, REM sleep and Deep Sleep have been found to relate to different aspects of memory. However, these studies have been primarily performed in adults without sleep disturbance. Are the same relationships found when sleep is disturbed (insomnia) and it occurs in the young?
- Our research group has performed several laboratory studies investigating the links between technology use and sleep. These have primarily focused on an individual playing offline videogames, and thus male samples. To date, there is a paucity of experimental research of other popular pre-sleep online activities. An opportunity exists in 2021, to work within a postdoctoral project testing the effects on social media use between female friends, and the effect on delaying sleep and hence sleep. There is scope to look at a number of research questions in this broad project.

### **Oren Griffiths (Lecturer in Psychology)**

My interests are divided between two clusters: fundamental attention and learning mechanisms, and the cognitive underpinnings of psychotic symptoms. I study both using a mixture of methods: behavioural methods (reaction time tasks), surveys, psychophysiology (eye-tracking, heart-rate, electroencephalography), and clinical interviews.

Current projects include:

- What are the electrophysiological correlates of feelings and familiarity and insight (the “aha” moment)? And to what extent are these processes disrupted in delusion-prone individuals?
- How does the attentional system learn to selectively orient to important and meaningful events in the world, and ignore noisy, irrelevant events? Do we need conscious processes to do this? Can conscious beliefs impact upon this selectivity?
- Learning two mentally associative events is a basic building block of complex cognition: learning which parts of the world signal safety or danger is a fundamental cognitive capacity. I am interested in the rules and processes that govern how people use (or misuse) the statistics of their environments to learn these associations, and in particular, the role of a person's expectancies in shaping the beliefs that they form. For example, why do people learn superstitious beliefs about e.g. how to win at the pokies, when there is no empirical evidence to support this belief?

### **Eva Kemps (Professor in Psychology)**

My research activities focus on applications of cognitive experimental psychology in eating behaviour. Two broad areas of ongoing research with opportunities for several post-graduate research projects include:

• *Subtly changing the food environment to promote healthier eating.* There is an abundance of unhealthy food in the contemporary Western environment, contributing to poor eating habits and rising obesity rates. Emerging evidence, based on the principles of nudging, suggests that making subtle changes to the food environment could combat unhealthy eating and weight gain. Some studies have shown that presenting a healthy food option alongside unhealthy ones can lead to healthier food choices and intake; however, others have shown the exact opposite. The overarching aim of this research is to find the optimal way of presenting food to promote healthier eating. Outcomes have the potential to dramatically change the way in which food is presented to consumers in everyday settings, from how vending machines are stocked, to how service stations set out their food displays, and fast-food outlets, cafés and online food delivery applications construct their menus.

• *Managing the psychological impulse to consume soft drinks.* Eating behaviour includes the consumption of not only food, but also beverages. In fact, the rising consumption of sugar-sweetened beverages, in particular soft drinks, makes up a significant proportion of daily sugar intake. In 2015 the World Health Organisation released new guidelines halving the recommended sugar intake, particularly from soft drinks, in an effort to help combat rising obesity rates. The overarching aim of this research is to develop an effective intervention protocol for reducing excessive sugar intake from soft drinks.

Relatedly, I am also interested in supervising projects in the areas of food craving, dietary supplementation, self-regulation and physical activity.

### **Daniel King (Senior Research Fellow in Psychology)**

I have a broad interest in the study of behavioural addictions in relation to digital technologies, including but not limited to video gaming and online gambling activities, social media use (Facebook, Instagram), and online purchasing/shopping behaviours. I am also interested in the cross-over/convergence of monetised gaming (e.g., microtransactions) and online gambling. My research has mainly adopted a clinical/social psychology perspective, including studies of the social, cognitive, and motivational determinants of excessive/repetitive behaviours, and investigations of the ways in which certain structural characteristics of these activities may relate to maladaptive behaviours.

Current Masters projects:

- Systematic review and meta-analysis of the effectiveness of interventions for problematic internet use, including gaming, social media, and other activities.
- Survey-based studies: (1) Australian mental health practitioners' knowledge, attitudes toward, and experiences of problematic internet use, including problem gaming and gaming disorder; (2) Problem gaming and related mental health conditions among Australian young people, including adolescents and young adults.

### **Julie Mattiske (Senior Lecturer in Psychology)**

For Masters projects, I am broadly interested in anxiety, anxiety disorders, and health-related issues. I have supervised Masters projects in a range of other areas including perfectionism, schizophrenia, and alcohol dependence. I would be very happy to serve as the internal cosupervisor for most of the nominated health projects, e.g., diabetes, oncology.

### **Reg Nixon (Professor in Psychology)**

My primary interest is child and adult response to traumatic stressors, including acute stress disorder (ASD), posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and Complex PTSD. I have several possible projects in following areas, some of which might have some initial data that could be used for a first study (for a PhD) or represent an entire project (for Masters):

- PTSD prevalence and use of evidence-based therapies in community mental health settings (e.g., adult community mental health, headspace)
- Self-guided/Stepped-care treatment approaches
- PTSD prevention/resilience training
- Health economic evaluation of PTSD therapy training and PTSD treatments
- Understanding most effective components of PTSD treatments (via coding of PTSD therapy sessions)
- Prospective study of relationships between trauma/PTSD, depression, sleep in children/young people (for PhD)

### **Emma Thomas** (Associate Professor in Psychology):

I have three areas of ongoing research that may be of interest to clinical postgraduate students (Masters and PhD):

- The distinction between well-being stemming from feelings of self-actualisation (eudaimonic well-being) versus feelings of well-being stemming from pleasure/an absence of pain (hedonic well-being). I have some pre-existing longitudinal data relating to both.
- The interplay between national well-being (that is, subjective feelings of the well-being of one's nation relating to social, economic and political functioning) and personal well-being (that is, subjective feelings of well-being in one's personal life, inter-personal relationships). I have some pre-existing longitudinal data relating to both.
- Feelings of gratitude relating to aspects of one's personal circumstances (personal gratitude) versus feelings of gratitude by virtue of privileges derived from group memberships (collective gratitude) and the relationships with well-being, entitlement and support for minority groups. I have developed an experimental approach to test this distinction.

### **Tracey Wade** (Matthew Flinders Distinguished Professor in Psychology)

*Not available for thesis supervision in 2021*

### **Michael Wenzel** (Professor in Psychology)

My research currently focuses on responses to victimizations and wrongdoing in interpersonal or intergroup contexts. I am interested in victims' and wrongdoers' responses to wrongdoing in the form of confession, apology, forgiveness and self-forgiveness, punishment and self-punishment, etc., and the role of these responses in the restoration of justice perceptions, moral identities, and social relationships. I am also specifically interested in the dynamics between these victim and offender responses, the co-engagement of relationship partners about the wrongdoing, and their effects on self and relationship repair.

### **Robyn Young** (Professor in Psychology)

*Not available for projects in 2021*

### **Projects Offered by Adjunct Staff or External Supervisors/Organisations**

Please note: any research offered by external organizations will require an internal university supervisor, where relative supervisory input will need to be negotiated on a case-by-case basis

**Dr Lisa Beatty** (Cancer Council SA Postdoctoral Fellow (Cancer Support), Flinders Centre for Innovation in Cancer)

*Not available for thesis supervision in 2021*

**Dr Samantha Finan** (Clinical Psychologist Child Protection Service, Flinders Medical Centre/Adjunct Doctor within College of Education, Psychology and Social Work)

My research area is within child protection and work as a Clinical Psychologist at the Child Protection Service within Flinders Medical Centre. In particular, I have research expertise in the qualitative interviews with vulnerable populations including children and families, systematic literature reviews and reviews of wider practice child protection frameworks.

We have several areas of research currently emerging at the Child Protection Service including; development of early intervention for pregnant mothers at risk of child maltreatment, examining barriers to engagement with intervention and child protection services, better understanding the process of forensic interviewing for children under the age of 7 years, measurement of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACES) within our Comprehensive Health and Developmental Assessment cohort (children under statutory child protection orders longer than 6 months) and research aiming to better our processes regarding assessment of parental capacity to change.

In 2020 we are looking to have a research student assist with a systematic literature review pertaining to the impact of reunification (including what services involved during reunification, type of abuse before removal, length of time in care and type of care placement) on child outcomes as this will be able to directly influence our parenting assessment recommendations and our reunification therapy here at CPS. This smaller project feeds into a larger program of pilot research where we are trialling a quality improvement project here at CPS where we offer 7 individual sessions during our parenting assessment with the focus on parent engagement in both DBT and Child Parent Psychotherapy skills. These sessions are aimed to assess parents “active” rather than “static” capacity to change and willingness to engage in services whilst ameliorating psychosocial risk factors, such as poor parental reflective functioning and difficulty in regulating emotions. Understanding parent’s active capacity to change alongside the current recommendations regarding reunification will assist our practitioners to provide more detailed and evidence based recommendations for children in care.

**Dr Gareth Furber** (e-Mental Health Project Officer, Health Counselling & Disability Services, Flinders University)

Studyology is a small-group 5x1hour clinical program designed to help students overcome procrastination and study avoidance. It was developed by Ben Smith and Gareth Furber at Flinders University, based on the principles of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT). The program (in various forms) has been delivered to 5 student groups thus far, with anecdotal reports of high satisfaction with the program and noticeable improvements in study motivation and satisfaction. The program has attracted the attention of educators outside of the university and thus it is important the program is formally evaluated to determine its value. We think this is the ideal program for a small crossover RCT with a waiting list control group assessing stress, mental health and study satisfaction as outcomes. Program slides and

facilitator manual and facilitator training can be provided by Gareth Furber. The program can be delivered face-to-face or online.

**Dr Ivanka Prichard** (Senior Lecturer in Health & Exercise Psychology,  
College of Nursing & Health Sciences)

My current research interests lie in the area of health psychology and body image, with a focus on the impact of social media on physical activity, food consumption, and body image.

Three broad areas of ongoing research with opportunities for several post-graduate research projects include:

- **Social media & body image**

Social media use is linked to a myriad of mental health concerns, including increased depression, body dissatisfaction and disordered eating symptomatology, and decreased self-esteem. This line of research aims to examine components of social media to determine the impact of different forms of social media (i.e. different platforms, different content) on body image.

- **Mothers, families, and body image**

Becoming a new mother is a significant time full of important identity and bodily changes for women. This area of research focuses on understanding body image in the postpartum period and developing interventions to promote body confidence (see <https://www.bodyconfidentmums.org/> for more information)

- **Mood & movement**

Sport & exercise play a critical role in relation to mental health. This area of research explores the links between mood, mental health, and movement behaviours (sport, physical activity) among different subgroups of people (i.e. athletes, youth participants, cardiac rehabilitation patients)

**Dr Michelle Short** (Clinical Psychologist, Headstart)

Flinders University's Child & Adolescent Sleep Clinic performed the first randomised controlled trial for insomnia experienced by school-aged children. The CBT that was trialled showed many improvements in sleep and anxiety. However, this was performed on typically developing children. An opportunity exists to replicate this study on atypically developing children – namely, those diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder.