

2017 HONOURS PROJECT TOPICS

Please note that potential student projects are not limited to the ones listed here.

Alexandre Schaefer

Associate Professor, Department of Psychology

Staff Profile: <http://www.med.monash.edu.my/staff/academic/psychology/alexandre-schaefer>

More information about my research can be found in my ResearchGate webpage:

https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Alexandre_Schaefer

1) The effects of poverty on cognitive and emotional health

One of the greatest global challenges of our times is to break the poverty cycle – the process through which poverty by itself creates conditions that maintain and cause further poverty across generations. How does poverty leads to poverty? Many explanations have been proposed, but one of the main drivers of “poverty traps” is believed to be the effect of socioeconomic status (SES) on cognitive brain function (Raizada et al, 2010; Haushofer & Fehr, 2014; Mani et al., 2013), and in particular on the so-called “executive functions”.

Executive functions (EF) are a set of cognitive capacities widely studied in the last 20 years that are thought to be key determinants of IQ, general adaptation and personal success in the course of a lifetime (Mushtaq, Bland, & Schaefer, 2011; Ruge & Braver, 2006). Executive functions are processes that are implemented when automatic schemata are not sufficient for successful adaptation to the environment. These processes tend to be conscious, attention- demanding, and they involve a flexible coordination of several cognitive processes in order to attain a specific goal (Schaefer et al., 2006; Mushtaq et al., 2011; Atkinson and Shiffrin, 1968; Baddeley, 1986, 2003; Norman and Shallice, 1986; Baddeley and Della Sala, 1996; Miller and Cohen, 2001; Braver et al., 2007). EF relies on a well-known network of brain structures encompassing the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex, the anterior cingulate cortex and the parietal cortex, amongst others (Mushtaq et al., 2011).

Although there is evidence indicating an effect of poverty on EF, the underlying causes of this effect are unknown. Is the poverty-EF link caused because poverty causes anxiety and stress, which could lead to lower performance in cognitive tasks? Is it because of differences in nutrition patterns between high and low SES populations? Is it because low-SES people have a less stimulating environment? All these questions are still unresolved. Solving these questions is extremely important because this could contribute to the creation of new psychological interventions and educational strategies that could protect low-income people from the effects of their environment on their cognitive health. Ultimately, these outcomes could hopefully significantly contribute towards breaking the poverty cycle, especially in developing countries.

In this project, potential honours students would take part in a large research project that involves working with both low and high income people, in the KL area but also potentially in rural areas of Malaysia and other countries in SE asia.

2) The cognitive neuroscience of decision-making.

I can offer opportunities of honours projects on the topic of decision-making processes, using cognitive neuroimaging methods (EEG/ERP). These projects involve lab work using the EEG facilities of the Neurobusiness Behavioural Lab. Possible topics are the following:

- 1) Neural correlates of purchasing decisions in a virtual shopping task.
- 2) What are the brain mechanisms involved in a bargain? What are the neural markers of accepting / rejecting offers during a bargaining process?
- 3) What are the brain mechanisms of accepting / rejecting offers in auctions.
- 4) What are the factors influencing risk aversion in decision-making?

Dr. Tam Cai Lian
Director, Master of Professional Counselling Course
Staff Profile: www.med.monash.edu.my/staff/academic/psychology/tam-cai-lian

Dr. Tam is interested in counseling related topics as well as the below:

Project 1: Investigation of Physical Exercise among Ethnic Groups of Malaysian Adults

The objectives of the present study would be to examine physical activity related to socio demographic factors among multi ethnic groups of Malaysian adults.

Project 2: Employees' coping strategies: Response to Occupational Stress

This research project is inextricably related to public health as occupational stress and psychological strain affect the well-being of individuals. The coping strategies found in the study can be used as bases to reduce occupational stress and psychological strain. The findings of the study will also be beneficial to the different professionals as it is plausible to believe that once the causes and consequences of occupational stress are uncovered, remedial actions can be taken to mitigate the problem of high turnover rate in the various industries.

Project 3: Perceived social support, socio-economic status and psychological well-being of young adults in Malaysia

While the influence of physical health on human functioning has been extensively studied in recent decades, the relationship between socio-economic status and psychological health is now attracting more academic interest. This study aims to examine the inter-relationship between gender, level of perceived social support and mental health status. Results of this study may serve as reference for the mental health professionals to plan their efforts in improving society's mental health effectively. For example, community-based mental health care providers should strive to examine the impact of SES, social network and client concerns that affect their mental health state.

Dr. Jasmine Loo

Staff Profile: www.med.monash.edu.my/staff/academic/psychology/jasmine-loo

Project 1 : Regulatory Focus Theory, risk taking and decision making processes

Regulatory focus theory is a goal pursuit theory investigating individual's perceptions and regulatory fit in decision making processes. This theory examines the relationship between motivation and methods in achieving goals. Promotion-focused individuals are more concerned with advancements and accomplishments (gains), while prevention-focused individuals are concerned with safety and responsibilities (non-losses). Hence, in this study, we would investigate the impact of promotion versus prevention focused prime on individual's decision making processes and risk taking propensity. Furthermore, we would gain insights into how individuals interact with the regulatory focus prime via eye-tracking analysis.

Project 2 : Positive character strengths and addictive behaviors

The majority of prevention and intervention research has focused on identifying risk factors and at-risk individuals. By reframing disorders to include the absence of positive characteristics and protective factors such as resilience, in addition to the presence of negative characteristics, strength-promoting interventions may consequently be more successful, effective, and appealing to consumers. Translational research that provides empirical evidence for effective solutions via the integration of positive psychology concepts in mainstream psychopathology is an avenue for further developments in both positive psychology and addiction research. Research design can be negotiated (e.g., experimental study, survey or qualitative study).

Project 3 Internet usage and addictions on the Internet among young adults

The bidirectional nature of the relationship between Internet Addiction (e.g., heavy reliance on Facebook or online gaming/activities) and other mental health correlates warrants attention as students at risk for excessive Internet use may have an increased vulnerability to certain mood or anxiety disorders, and poorer academic performance. As such, the current lack of a comprehensive understanding of Internet use – and potential misuse – and its correlates (e.g. loneliness and depression) among university students in Malaysia is an important issue that needs to be addressed. The research design can be negotiated.

Other projects:

- Cross-cultural research: Gambling, drinking and quality of life
- Attention and eye movement responses to targeted stimuli utilizing laboratory-based eye-tracker
- Psychobiology of decision making processes utilizing EEG
- Prevalence or population-based survey research
- The effectiveness of prevention and awareness programs in mental health and problem gambling

Note: Co-supervision is viable for all projects.

Dr. Karen Golden

Staff Profile: www.med.monash.edu.my/staff/academic/psychology/karen-jennifer-golden

Project 1: Research topics related to parenting.

Project 2: Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD): a range of topics within the domain of ASD that may be connected with the ongoing Malaysian-Australian Autism Sleep Health Program. There is also a comparison group of typical children.

Wellbeing and resilience of parents/families of children with Autism Spectrum Disorders in Malaysia

Environmental influences on autism-spectrum disorder

Project 3: Research topics related to sleep.

Project 4: Non-suicidal self-injury (NSSI) in the Malaysian context.

Project 5: Psychological aspects of acceptance of nature-based solutions. Nature-based solutions simultaneously provide environmental, social and economic benefits by bringing more nature and natural features and processes into cities, landscapes and seascapes.

Other topics in the area of cross-cultural, family well-being, and clinical psychology could be discussed.

Dr. Miriam Sang-Ah Park

Staff Profile: www.med.monash.edu.my/staff/academic/psychology/miriam-sang-ah-park

Project 1: Competition and modesty across cultures: Understanding the social expression and dynamics with reference to the specific historical and cultural contexts within which the individuals are socialized

Project 2: Cross-cultural investigation of psychological and subjective well-being

Project 3: Religion and its impact on lifestyle factors and choices in Malaysia

Project 4: Perceptions of the family and the self in the Malaysian context: Are there any ethnic differences in how the young people understand and think about the family and the self in Malaysia?

Project 5: Family democratisation: Roles within the family and gender equality

It is said that the recent decades have seen changes in the choices regarding the family, rise in women's status both at work and at home, and more equal relations at home. To what extent is this true? Are women and children gaining more say in the decisions made in the family? Can this trend be found in Asian countries, where the traditional and religious beliefs (e.g., Confucian ideals, Muslim culture) are still quite strong?

Project 6: Social change, national identity and xenophobia

In many parts of the world, rapid social, economic and political changes have brought changes in people's values and beliefs. Inglehart (1996)'s theory of Postmodernist Value suggests that socioeconomic developments bring changes to value priorities. More specifically, he claims that the individuals growing up in the more stable socioeconomic conditions will prioritise what he calls Self-Expression and Secular-Rational Values (with emphases on freedom of choice, quality of life, etc.) rather than Survival and Traditional Values (with emphases on personal achievement, national security, etc.). It may also be believed that the level of xenophobia in many countries is on the rise due to the economic, social and political instabilities. This proposed research will examine whether social change, strong sense of national identity (and associated exclusionism) impact on xenophobia across countries.

A/P Dr. Shamsul Haque

Staff Profile: www.med.monash.edu.my/staff/academic/psychology/shamsul-haque

Project 1: Organization of autobiographical memories within the autobiographical knowledge structure

Project 2: Autobiographical memory in psychiatric patients

Project 3: Culture and the construction of autobiographical memories

Project 4: Autobiographical memories as guided by political and cultural life scripts

Dr Vanlal Thanzami

Staff Profile: www.med.monash.edu.my/staff/academic/psychology/vanlal-thanzami

Predictors of aggression and exploring different forms of aggression such as direct, indirect and displaced aggression; reactive and proactive aggression

Exploring the relationship between need for revenge and personality factors associated with vengefulness, such as anger rumination – dissipation and trait forgiveness, and how they relate to different forms of aggression

Cross-cultural variations in aggression with specific focus on cultural values, sex differences and conflict resolution tactics

Evolutionary concepts in aggression: genetic-relatedness and violence (e.g. Cinderella effect) across cultures

Intergenerational transmission of conflict tactics

Intimate partner violence

Honour-based violence

Attribution of victim blame, perpetrator blame, and perpetrator punishment

Psychopathy, narcissism and borderline personality disorder

Cyber bullying - perpetration and victimisation

Criminal computer behaviour

Exploring the psychological impact of the use of social networking sites and mobile technology

Dr Brendon Robert Tagg

Staff Profile: <http://www.med.monash.edu.my/staff/academic/psychology/brendon-tagg>

Dr Brendon is interested in advising topics in social psychology that involve qualitative or mixed-methods design. The scope can be negotiated according to the specific student's interest.

Project 1: Malaysian national school uniforms and national identity

This project will involve examining the relationship between Malaysia secondary school students' and teachers' experiences of national school uniforms.

Project 2: Play and creativity within the Malaysian education system

This project will involve extending an undergraduate research project that investigated the 'edutainment' centre KidZania Kuala Lumpur.

Project 3: Modernity, tradition and attitudes towards road safety in Malaysia

This project will involve extending an undergraduate project that investigated the factors contributing to the low use of child car seats in the Malaysian city of Kuala Terengganu.

Project 4: Malaysian masculinities and minority sport participation

This project will extend Dr. Brendon's doctoral research, which investigated elite men's netball in New Zealand, to the Malaysian context.

Professor Daniel D Reidpath

Staff Profile: <http://www.med.monash.edu.my/staff/academic/public-health/daniel-d-reidpath>

Daniel Reidpath is the Professor of Population Health in the School of Medicine and Health Sciences. His undergraduate degree was in Psychology and Philosophy and his PhD was in Cognitive Psychology, specifically in the area of judgement and reasoning.

Life, Death and Moral Judgments

You are standing on a footbridge watching the traffic pass beneath. Standing next to you is a stranger about twice your size. A trolley bus is driving out of control and will crash killing the five people on board. You realise that if you push the stranger off the bridge into the path of the trolley bus you will be able to stop the trolley, saving the five lives, but killing the stranger. What do you do?

This is the classic "Trolley Problem" widely discussed in Psychology (Shallow, Iliev, & Medin, 2011; Kortenkamp & Moore, 2014; Greene, 2014), Philosophy (Thomson, 1976; Foot, 2002), and Economics (Lanteri, 2010). How people behave and how they reason about the trolley problem is important, because it potentially tells us something about personal moral reasoning and bigger resource allocation questions. When can society sacrifice the wellbeing of a few to save or improve the wellbeing of the many: always, sometimes, or never?

In Philosophy the trolley problem is an armchair "thought experiment" used to explore issues of deontological and consequentialist moral philosophy. In Psychology it is used experimentally to explore moral reasoning within a Cognitive Psychology framework of judgment and reasoning experiments.

There are a number of un(der)-explored questions related to the trolley problem open to experimental investigation. A few examples would be:

- How does the decision vary according to the number of lives saved?
- If only a percentage of lives on the trolley bus are saved, how does this affect the outcome?
- How does the above vary with the directness of the intervention (push the stranger in front of the trolley OR flip a switch that results in the strangers death, and the saving of the lives on the trolley)?

More exploratory approaches are under-utilised in the trolley problem and would be valuable for what they could tell us about the reasoning:

- Can people make trolley decisions and explain how they reached the decision they did?

An excellent review of the trolley problem can be found in (Bruers & Braeckman, 2014).

References

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