

# psycobabble

ISSUE 7 - September

## Inside this Issue

- Word from the Head
- News in the School
- Publications

## Word from the Head

A quick glance at this edition shows why the university was so quiet over the mid-trimester break: Everyone was at a conference. There are three conference 'reports', from the skiing conference, the corrections conference, and NZABA (that's why there were people with beards wandering the halls). Ironically, one was missing – the New Zealand Schizophrenia Research Group also met at VUW in the days before NZABA. Well done to everyone.

Since the last edition, Study@Vic also happened and was a roaring success. Steve Prime rocked the lecture session with some serious 'wow' moments, and Nick must now be more of an expert on the Stroop Effect than she ever hoped.

On the public contribution front, our own Prof. Tony Ward has been a regular on the TV and radio circuit talking about Stewart Murray Wilson, and Gina has been out to the provinces talking about beauty. Taciano is currently the subject of a press release being waved on the portal, and there's more to come from others in the School as well.

As a final word, the next edition will come out after the end of the teaching trimester – enjoy the last classes of the year (giving them and attending them), remember the events that typically close out the trimester such as the Honours poster session and the Postgraduate Conference (October 26th!)

Marc Wilson  
Head of School

## News in the School

### New Arrival

by Proud Papa Bart

As you probably all know by now, on Sunday the 19th of August, about two and a half hours before our wedding anniversary, our son Robin was born. Although he was about 11 days too late and the birth itself was not completely without complications, both he and Jiun came home a few days later. In the last three weeks, he has grown 1 kg (a pace which we hope he won't keep up for too long) and both mother and son (and father) are doing very well. We are all very happy to have brought a new kiwi into this world



and would like to thank all of you for your kind wishes and the wonderful flowers. And if you should wonder where the nicely warm white blanket comes from... it was a gift made by Wendy, and Robin uses it every day. I hope Jiun and Robin will have time to come and visit the School soon.

## News from Jason's Lab:

New Scientist (11 August, 2012) devoted an entire column spotlighting NZ robins' ratio discrimination involving large quantities as discovered in new paper by: Garland, Low, & Burns (2012). Large quantity discrimination by North Island robins (*Petroica longipes*) Animal Cognition. DOI: 10.1007/s10071-012-0537-3.

Prof. Josef Perner has devoted a page in his new Trends in Cognitive Science paper illustrating, commenting, and praising the in-press Psychological Science paper by Low & Watts on blind-spots in human's efficient mindreading system.

Profs. Robert Scott and Stephen Kosslyn (Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford) have invited Jason to write an entry on 'Two Systems View of Theory of Mind Understanding' for their forthcoming online publication Emerging Trends in the Social and Behavioral Sciences (SAGE Publishers). Emerging Trends' aim is to identify important areas of current research, focusing on where work in certain areas of research is likely to be headed going forward. Emerging Trends is scheduled for launch in early 2015 and the contributing entries will cover key topics in the core social and behavioral science disciplines of anthropology, economics, psychology and sociology.

Penny Tok has passed her PhD oral exam; yay! Penny's PhD thesis is entitled 'Inner Speech Use in Autism'. Advanced congratulations to Dr Tok.

## Upcoming Events from VSPS

- **The Great Debate: Thursday 20th September at The Hunter Lounge]**  
Back again for 2012, we've got 6 lecturers lined up (including Marc Wilson, Matt Crawford and David Harper) preparing to go head-to-head on the topic "Humans are inherently selfish". It's sure to be a great night, leading to some good laughs and some interesting discussion.
- **The Combined Sciences Ball: [Saturday 22nd September at The Queen's Wharf Ballroom]**  
Along with The Science Society and The Geology Society, we've got an awesome night prepared for all. Tickets are selling out fast, so if you haven't got one yet you can reserve one here. Hopefully we'll see you there.
- **Murder Mystery: [Wednesday 3rd October around Kelburn Campus]**  
After the success of last year, we've got another Murder Mystery that needs solving. So organise a team and get your problem solving minds together and you could win some amazing prizes, plus the bragging rights of being the super sleuths of 2012. More info to come closer to the date, so keep your eyes peeled for anything suspicious.

## NZABA, Wellington 2012

Over the first weekend in September Victoria played host to the 9th annual meeting of the New Zealand Association for Behaviour Analysis. If you heard a collective sigh of relief at the end of the conference it may have been related to the presentation of groundbreaking research without the accompaniment of any earth-shattering ground movements. As many may remember two years ago the NZABA conference was held amidst the September earthquake in Christchurch (a feat we were not in a hurry to repeat).

Attendees were treated to a packed schedule of great talks and all became fast learners at negotiating all of the construction going on around the University. The Saturday talks were followed by the conference dinner at One Red Dog on the waterfront. The evening ended with many attendees visiting some of Wellington's popular nightspots (and suffering for it the next morning).

Congratulations to our own Gordon Tan for winning one of the coveted Best Student Presenter Prizes for his talk on verbal and non-verbal effects of relational training on slot machine gambling. Congratulations Gordon! And lastly much thanks to Maree, Lincoln, and Anne Macaskill who did a HUGE amount of work organising and running the conference. There goes another successful NZABA conference.



## Ski Conference

So here we are in Queenstown at the Australasian Winter Conference on Brain Research (AKA the ski conference). The skiing was good, the wine was great but most importantly all the students did us proud. Fantastic presentations and a really good showing from VUW. Here we are celebrating our outstanding showing with a great home cooked dinner by Sue and Dave accompanied by some great central Otago wine. No wine glass in the Schenk hand. HmMMMM

## Department of Corrections Psychologists' Annual Conference, Rotorua

Six members of the Polaschek lab spent 4 days in Rotorua this week, hanging out with about 130 psychologists attending the Department of Corrections Psychologists' Annual conference. In addition to Devon's keynote address at the opening of the conference, five of the students—Rebecca Bell, Tadhg Daly, Sophie Dickson, Morgan Sissons and Julia Yesberg—presented their PhD research to an audience of about 20 correctional psychologists. It is likely that the event was the first ever student symposium at this in-house conference. The feedback on the students' presentations was outstanding, and we hope that the experience will set off a new era of closer interaction between academic researchers and practising psychologists in corrections.

The individual presentations were:

- Do Now, Think Later: Understanding and Assessing Impulsivity in a Forensic Treatment Context.* Rebecca Bell  
*How do psychopaths behave in treatment? The development of a tool to measure in-treatment behavior for prisoners in the high-risk special treatment units.* Tadhg Daly  
*What can psychopathology patterns tell us about differential treatment effects in offender rehabilitation?* Morgan Sissons  
*Life after treatment for Te Whare Manaakitanga graduates: Investigating different patterns of treatment response.* Julia Yesberg  
*Planning to avoid risk or planning for a good life: The relationship between release plan valence and reoffending.* Sophie Dickson  
*From referral to recidivism (or not): Our growing understanding of intensive treatment and high risk prisoners.* Devon Polaschek



# Student Finds the Truth Behind 'truthiness'

People are more likely to believe something is true if a photograph appears alongside the story, according to findings by a Victoria University student.

Eryn Newman, a PhD student in Victoria's School of Psychology, has been examining the phenomenon American comedian and news satirist Stephen Colbert calls 'truthiness'—the feeling that something is true.

In four different experiments Ms Newman, and colleagues at a Canadian university (the University of Victoria, based in British Columbia), discovered that people are more likely to believe claims are true, regardless of whether they actually are true, when a decorative photograph appears alongside the claim. The work is being published this week in a leading psychology journal, the *Psychonomic Bulletin & Review*.

"We wanted to examine how the kinds of photos people see every day—the ones that decorate newspaper or TV headlines, for example—might produce 'truthiness,'" says Ms Newman. "We were really surprised by what we found."

Ms Newman and her colleagues showed people a series of claims such as, "the liquid metal inside a thermometer is magnesium" and asked them to agree or disagree that each claim was true. In some cases, the claim appeared with a decorative photograph that didn't reveal if the claim was actually true—such as a thermometer. Other claims appeared alone. When a decorative photograph appeared with the claim, people were more likely to agree that the claim was true, regardless of whether it was.

Across all the experiments, the findings fit with the idea that photos might help people conjure up images and ideas about the claim more easily than if the claim appeared by itself. "We know that when it's easy for people to bring information to mind, it 'feels' right," says Ms Newman.

The research has important implications for situations in which people encounter decorative photos, such as in the media or in education. Professor Maryanne Garry, Deputy Dean of Victoria's Faculty of Graduate Research, who is based in the School of Psychology, is Ms Newman's supervisor. She says "decorative photos grab people's attention. This research suggests that these photos might have unintended consequences, leading people to accept information because of their feelings rather than the facts."

In 2011, Ms Newman travelled to the University of California, Irvine, on a Fulbright Science and Innovation Graduate Award. While there, she worked with Professor Elizabeth Loftus investigating the ways images can distort eyewitness memory, and how images related to a crime could lead people to misremember details about a crime they had recently witnessed.

Ms Newman's research is supported by a Marsden Fund grant, and is part of a larger project looking at how images can influence people's belief and memory. For more details, please contact Eryn Newman phone 027 925 5946 or email [eryn.newman@vuw.ac.nz](mailto:eryn.newman@vuw.ac.nz)

The full-text article is available to journalists on request by contacting Renate Bayaz, Springer, phone +49 6221 487 8531 or email [renate.bayaz@springer.com](mailto:renate.bayaz@springer.com)



## Does he look familiar to you?

# Wellington Duo Examine Environmental Psychology

Two researchers from Victoria University's School of Psychology have uncovered some interesting results while investigating people's knowledge and concern about environmental issues.



Senior Lecturer Dr Taciano Milfont has conducted the first known longitudinal study into people's levels of knowledge and concern about climate change, as well as their perception of their ability to influence climate change. His research, a New Zealand-based study which took place over the course of a year, has recently been published in leading social sciences journal *Risk Analysis*.

Dr Milfont surveyed more than 250 people across the country three times over the course of a year, to gauge their levels of knowledge on climate change, levels of concern, and personal efficacy levels—or how much people felt they could personally do something about global warming and climate change.

Dr Milfont says a major finding was that levels of knowledge, concern and perceived efficacy were stable across the one-year period, suggesting a strong belief system regarding climate change and global warming in New Zealand.

"Another major finding was that people with greater knowledge about global warming and climate change had higher levels of concern, and these increased levels of concern led people to feel that they could personally contribute towards these serious issues."

Dr Milfont is supervising the work of Dr Laurel Evans, a visiting scholar at Victoria, whose article on self-interest

and environmental behaviour was published on the influential *Nature Climate Change* website last month.

Her research involved two experiments designed to test people's willingness to recycle after reading information on a separate environmental behaviour—in this case, car-pooling.

Through the two studies, Dr Evans and colleagues at Cardiff University found that people were more likely to recycle when they received information about the environmental benefits of car-pooling.

However, levels of recycling remained unchanged when people received only self-interested information—for example how they could save money by car-pooling—or self-interested information as well as environmental information.

This finding could have significant implications for environmental campaigns, says Dr Evans.

"Environmental campaigns have increasingly used self-interested reasons, like saving money, to encourage people to act in a more environmentally-friendly way.

"But our research shows that such campaigns may not have the expected 'spillover' effect—that is, they may not promote general environmental behaviour beyond the one targeted in the message.

"Receiving only self-interested information had less impact on the 'spillover' behaviour than receiving only environmental information. The results were less clear when the information was combined, but in our studies, people were most likely to recycle when receiving purely environmental information about car-pooling."

Dr Milfont and Dr Evans have also been working together on a local project for Wellington and Kapiti local government, researching resident's opinions about the potential for sea-level rise in Wellington city.

Dr Milfont has received a Marsden Fund grant to carry out further research on environmental psychology. His previous work has shown that future-oriented individuals tend to hold greater environmental concern, and he will explore this further—how people's future thinking and concerns about future generations affect their attitudes and behaviour regarding environmental problems

## Publications

Evans, L., Milfont, T. L., & Lawrence, J. (2012). *Perceptions of sea-level rise in Wellington City and Kapiti Coast Districts*. New Zealand: School of Psychology, Victoria University of Wellington.

Milfont, T. L., Tilyard, B. A., Gouveia, V. V., Tonetti, L., & Natale, V. (in press). *Female gender but not season of birth is associated with mood seasonality in a near-equatorial Brazilian city*. *Brazilian Journal of Psychiatry*

Parsons, J, Tabor, AS, & Fischer, R (in press) *Shelter from the global economic crisis: New Zealand and overseas-born employees concerns and migration intentions*. *Journal of Pacific Rim Psychology*.