Welcome by Andy Grayson

Welcome to the first edition of the Child Psychology Newsletter, the Division of Psychology at Nottingham Trent University has a vibrant and diverse educational and developmental research culture and this newsletter captures the range of work being carried out about children by our academic team and by the postgraduate students who study on our MSc Psychology and the MSc Applied Child Psychology courses. I hope you enjoy the newsletter and feel free to contact us about the research we do or to ask about our range of undergraduate and postgraduate psychology courses.

In the Division of Psychology at NTU we are carrying out a lot of interesting research. As well as the research relating to child psychology, we also have numerous research units exploring other aspects of psychology, including SOCAMRU (the Sexual Offences, Crime and Misconduct Research Unit), ESRU (the Emergency Services Research Unit) and WOPRU (Work and Organisational Psychology Research Unit). Similarly if you have any queries or feedback about the newsletter or want to join our mailing list, please email janine.coates@ntu.ac.uk. We hope you find this newsletter interesting and we welcome any comments or feedback you might have.

In this volume:

Theory in Developmental Psychology

Gimme a ‘C’! Gimme a ’H’! Gimme a ‘U’! Gimme an ‘N’! Gimme a ‘K’!...what have we got? A theory of developmental psychology (hopefully), Dr Gary Jones Page 1

Research Focus

Examining the ‘darker’ side of children’s peer relationships, Dr Lucy Betts Page 3

“We’re all friends”: Children with special educational needs and disabilities perceptions of classmates in physical education, Dr Janine Coates Page 4

Written language skills in children with spoken language impairments, Dr Rebecca Larkin and Dr Gareth Williams Page 5

Student Focus

Parental Alcoholism and its Effects on the Children-a look at mediating factors, Aasavri Borgharkar Page 6

Events

Page 7

Student Focus

From music teacher to educational psychologist..., Karen How Page 8

News

Page 8
Theory in Developmental Psychology

Gimme a ‘C’! Gimme a ‘H’! Gimme a ‘U’! Gimme an ‘N’! Gimme a ‘K’!...what have we got? A theory of developmental psychology (hopefully)
Gary Jones, Reader in Psychology

Although one of the goals of psychology is to explain human behaviour, psychologists often over-complicate their theories and explanations. This is evident in developmental psychology by the use of various mechanisms that supposedly influence children’s learning: processing speed, short-term memory capacity, M-power, schemas, accommodation and assimilation, strategies…the list is seemingly endless. Yet there is one theory that has been over-looked for so many years that even the cobwebs have got cobwebs on them.

Chunking (Miller, 1956) is such a first year psychology staple that it barely needs an introduction. The hypothesis is that we continuously group and recode pieces of information into larger and larger chunks. For example, the repeated exposure to sequential pieces of information such as British, Broadcasting, and Corporation will eventually lead to the items being chunked as one piece of information – BBC.

But hold on…chunking is over fifty years old! Strangely enough, just because a theory is old does not mean it is wrong. Think about the potential of this learning mechanism for developmental psychology. Learning to read is in part the gradual mapping of individual sounds to spellings that eventually group together to form words and sentences. Learning faces is in part the gradual mapping of individual features and their spatial relationships into a coherent group that represents a person. Learning to…well, you get the picture.

Can chunking explain all of the learning that occurs in child development? Erm...no. But child development primarily involves learning new knowledge and this is also what chunking involves. Added to this, no serious researcher would argue against the fact that people chunk information. Chunking therefore seems like a reasonable place to start for an uncontroversial yet parsimonious explanation of child development. This is what we have shown in the domain of child language. By coupling a good estimate of the language young children hear with an implementation of the chunking hypothesis, language data can be explained without recourse to complicated theories.

In fact, we can also show that chunking can cause perceived changes to other...

“Why explain behaviour using a complicated theory when a simple one will do?”
mechanisms of development such as processing speed, even though the other mechanisms remain constant. It may sound odd to promote a theory of development when we know it cannot explain all of the developmental data – but equally, why explain behaviour using a complicated theory when a simple one will do?

Our view is to examine the extent to which developmental data can be explained via chunking and to only add complexity when a chunking account fails. As the papers below illustrate, a chunking account can go a long way...

References:

Recent publications from the Division...
Coates, J. (under review). Children with Special Educational Needs Perceptions of Teachers in Physical Education. Adapted Physical Activity Quarterly.
Research Focus

Peer Relationships: Examining the ‘darker’ side of children’s peer relationships
Lucy Betts, Lecturer in Psychology

When exploring the importance of children’s peer relationships, researchers and practitioners have tended to focus on the positive aspects of children’s peer relationships. For example, examining the link between having friends and being well liked by peers for children’s school adjustment (i.e., the extent to which they are positive about school, feel comfortable in the school environment, and succeed at school) and psychosocial adjustment more generally. Consequently, there is a wealth of evidence that suggests positive peer relationships are beneficial for children, both in terms of their short-term and longer-term adjustment and as such, many interventions have been developed to try to enhance positive peer relationships.

Previously, I too have conducted research that has focused on the positive aspects of children’s peer liking for their school adjustment (Betts, Rotenberg, Trueman, and Stiller, 2012). However, not all of children’s peer relationships are positive: children can readily report who they don’t like as well as who they do like from their peer group. In recognition of this distinction, along with James Stiller, I have begun examining the ‘darker’ side of peer relationships. From 9 to 11 year-olds reports of peer liking, we have identified social networks within classrooms of instances of reciprocal peer dislike between the children which denote instances of when both children say that they don’t like each other. We have looked at how these instances of reciprocal peer dislike influence the children’s school adjustment and social relationship quality over three months. The findings which were recently presented at the negative ties and social networks workshop in Budapest (Betts and Stiller, April 2012), indicated that reciprocal peer dislike predicted aspects of school adjustment and social relationship quality.

Specifically, experiencing either very low or very high levels of reciprocal peer dislike predicted higher levels of loneliness. Also, experiencing either very low or very high levels of reciprocal peer dislike predicted lower friendship quality assessed as help, security, and closeness. The children’s reports of reciprocal dislike also showed some degree of stability over time, although there was a reduction in reciprocal peer dislike over the three months.

These findings seem to suggest that for children experiencing either very high levels or very low levels of reciprocal peer dislike can influence aspects of their adjustment. Therefore, recognising the importance of the ‘darker’ side of children’s peer relationships is important as it may more accurately reflect what happens in children’s classroom, although of course, we need to understand why children dislike others as understanding their motives will give us a greater insight in to children’s peer relationships.

References:
Research Focus

“We’re all friends”: Children with special educational needs and disabilities perceptions of classmates in physical education
Janine Coates, Lecturer in Psychology

The relationships children have with others during their school years are a driving force in their later psychological development and well-being. Friendship is considered to be a significant factor in child well-being, and has implications for later adult adjustment.

While this topic is relatively well researched for typically developing children, it is somewhat under-researched in relation to children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). There is also a lack of research examining the significance of peer relationships in specific school settings, such as in physical education (PE). PE is an important setting to consider due to its focus on peer collaboration, team games, and peer support, which provides opportunity for children to interact with their peers in a less formal setting than classroom-based subjects.

A qualitative study looking at the perceptions of thirty children with SEND aged between 7 and 14 years in primary, secondary and special schools in North West England was carried out with the aim of understanding children’s experiences of their peers in PE lessons.

Previous research indicated that peer relationships for children with SEND were often strained, but where children felt included and like they belonged in lessons, perceptions were positive (Blinde and McCallister, 1998; Goodwin and Watkinson, 2000; Fitzgerald, 2005). This was often related to the child’s SEND. Overall, children with SEND perceived their classmates as friends, feeling included in activities and supported in learning. This was found across age groups and schools, and children did not feel that their SEND impacted upon these relationships.

There were some incidences where children looked upon classmates unfavourably because of bullying. These were infrequent and unrelated to the child’s SEND and were only discussed by children over 11 years of age, demonstrating that the developmental age of the child might be a factor in understanding peer relationships. Nevertheless, while bullying was isolated it did impact on children’s general experiences of PE and their self-efficacy.

Overall, the research showed that friendship in PE lessons plays an important role in social and psychological well-being of children with SEND; as well as providing support to children for participation and skill development. This demonstrates the need for teachers to promote inclusive interactions in PE lessons; ensuring children with SEND are included and experience meaningful participation within PE lessons. It also provides scope for future research examining factors relating to peer relationships among children with SEND.

References:
Research Focus

Written language skills in children with spoken language impairments
Rebecca Larkin and Gareth Williams, Lecturers in Psychology

We have recently completed a British Academy funded project that investigated the narrative writing and spelling skills of children with specific language impairment (SLI). Children with SLI have non-verbal ability within the typical range, but show marked difficulties with spoken language, despite being exposed to an adequate learning environment (Bishop, 1992). While there is plenty of research demonstrating that children with SLI are at high risk of literacy failure (Goulandris, Snowling and Walker, 2000), relatively little is known about their written language and spelling skills. A clear understanding of the nature of the literacy difficulties experienced by children with SLI is essential for developing targeted and effective intervention programmes.

The children who took part in this study were all from one school in the West Midlands of the United Kingdom, which included a specialist language unit for children with spoken language impairments. The sample consisted of 15 participants with SLI (mean age nine years five months), 15 chronological age matched children (mean age nine years five months), and 15 spelling age matched children (mean age = seven years seven months). The children completed a range of cognitive, language and literacy measures over the course of two sessions.

The narrative writing task involved the children writing a letter to a friend inviting them on a special day out of the child’s choosing. The spelling tasks were designed to assess different spelling strategies that are often employed by typically-developing children.

Results showed that children with SLI used a significantly less diverse range of words, had lower quality written compositions overall and lower levels of organisation, unity and coherence than their age-matched peers. The children with SLI also produced a higher proportion of spelling errors in their prose writing than control children of the same age. Overall, writing skills were found to be strongly associated with reading skills. On the single-word spelling tasks, children with SLI showed a marked deficit in producing plausible spelling attempts, yet they performed comparably to spelling-age controls on morphological spelling skills. Further exploration of the data demonstrated that not all children with spoken language impairments show marked spelling difficulties, and that those with good non-word repetition skills may be less at risk.

The study highlighted the potential link between spoken language impairments and written language deficits. The findings suggest that intervention programmes used in schools should interlink spoken language support with literacy support wherever possible. The results also underline the importance of assessing literacy skills thoroughly in children with recognised spoken language impairments.

References:

Student Focus: Specialist Essay

Parental Alcoholism and its Effects on the Children- A Look at Mediating Factors
Summary of specialist essay by Aasavri Borgharkar (MSc Applied Child Psychology)

Alcohol use disorders are prevalent globally. A large percentage of people who abuse alcohol are also parents. There has been extensive research on the effects of living with an alcoholic parent on children. Children of Alcoholics (COA’s) tend to have a higher risk for a number of problems including substance abuse, behavioural disorders, cognitive deficits, academic failure, somatic complaints and interpersonal difficulties (Dobkin, Tremblay and Sacchitelle, 1997). These effects can sometimes persist into adulthood.

The relationship between parental alcoholism and negative effects in children is not as straightforward as it might seem. Many factors that mediate this relationship have garnered attention. Aversive childhood experiences like abuse, neglect, mothers who have experienced domestic violence and mental illness among parents are some of the mediating factors.

Aversive childhood experiences are strongly related to parental alcoholism as well as personal alcohol abuse (Xiao, Dong, Yao, Li and Ye, 2008). The parent-child relationship is another mediating factor between parental alcoholism and its effects specifically relate to depressive symptoms in children (Kelley et al, 2011).

However, not all children who experience parental alcoholism develop the adverse effects discussed earlier. This indicates the presence of individual and environmental protective factors that prevent them from experiencing the negative effects of parental alcoholism (Lee and Cranford, 2008). Protective factors within the individual include resilience and self-regulation while those in the environment include positive family environment, extra familial influence, sense of spirituality and access to and availability of sources of help.

Even though there has been a considerable amount of research that has studied the negative effects of parental alcoholism on children, there are few if any, interventions for children. One of the main reasons for this is that parents tend not to be willing to let their children participate in interventions (Andreas and O’Farrell, 2009). The interventions that are available tend to be targeted at parents and these include individual treatments such as, cognitive behavioural therapy, behavioural couple therapy and parent skill training.

Due to the mediating factors identified, it is proposed that a multi-perspective intervention might enhance current interventions. For example, a three step...
treatment programme could be used that would cater to the specific needs of the COA population. The first step could focus on the individual who has alcohol dependency and the way they may overcome their addiction. The second step could focus on couples therapy and parenting skills, which would address the mediating factors of the parent-child relationship and marital relationship. The third, and possibly most important, step would include direct intervention with the child. The third step of the intervention could include educating the child about alcoholism, skill building, and ways to build and maintain social support as well as finding alternative positive activities.

These steps may occur simultaneously and need not follow one another. This approach would consider the family as a whole and take into account a range of known mediating factors in order to build a better family environment.

References:

Events

Some academics in the division have been busy attending conferences over the summer months...

Dr Anne Emerson, along with a team of colleagues from Nottingham University, attended the International Society for the Scientific Study of Intellectual Disability (IASSID) World Congress in Halifax, Canada from 9 - 14 July. Anne presented two papers, in collaboration with Dr Jackie Dearden, Educational Psychologist with Nottingham Children and Families, on their work with children with severe intellectual and communication impairment. Their model of an innovative method for assessing and working with this group of children was well received.

Dr Janine Coates, presented a poster at Children, Young People and Adults: Extending the Conversation Conference of the International Childhood and Youth Research Network at the University of Central Lancashire, on 5 – 7 September 2012. Her poster explored research methods used to engage children with special educational needs in research.

Dr Lucy Betts and Dr James Stiller presented a paper entitle “Children’s dislike of peers as a predictor of school adjustment and relationship quality” at the Negative Ties and Social Networks workshop in Budapest, Hungary, in April 2012.

Dr Gareth Williams, Dr Rebecca Larkin and Samarita Blaggan presented a paper in July 2012 at The 13th International Conference of the EARLI Special Interest Group on Writing in Porto, Portugal. The paper was entitled “Written language skills in children with specific language impairment”.

NOTTINGHAM TREN T UNIVERSITY
Student Focus: Life After University

From music teacher to educational psychologist...
Karen How, NTU MSc Psychology Graduate

Hello, my name is Karen. I’m a Cambridge music graduate, clarinettist, saxophonist and experienced teacher. I’m also a graduate of the NTU MSc Psychology (conversion course) and, as of September 2012, will be a Trainee Educational Psychologist at the University of Sheffield.

My interest in psychology grew during my years teaching music, particularly through working one-to-one with youngsters of all ages with a wide range of backgrounds, needs and aspirations. In 2010, aged almost 30, I gave up my teaching position, moved back to my native Nottingham and began the MSc. Adjusting to my new life and identity as a psychology student wasn’t easy, and some of the methodologies and approaches required by the discipline came as a bit of a surprise. I relished the new challenges I faced, not only in terms of the subject matter itself but also learning to think in new, scientific, critical ways.

I specialised increasingly as the year progressed; my optional exam module, research project and specialist essay all concerned aspects of children’s language and literacy development. I’ve always been fascinated by language, not only as a communicative tool but also the extent to which it can shape thought itself. Although a general psychology course, the MSc Psychology at NTU offers a fair bit of scope for students to follow their own particular interests.

Having completed my Masters I began work as the Assessment Teacher at I CAN’s Dawn House School, a special school for youngsters with language and communication difficulties. This role fitted my academic specialisation perfectly and provided me with invaluable practical experience. I worked with a speech and language therapist and occupational therapist; we carried out formal and informal assessments of children’s strengths, needs and the barriers to learning they would be likely to encounter. Some of these assessments resulted in placement at the school, whereas others were for information and recommendations for support within other settings. My knowledge of children’s language and literacy and insights into a range of literacy difficulties proved particularly useful.

I took the first available opportunity to apply for the Professional Doctorate in Educational Psychology. I expected this year’s application to be a 'practice run', hopefully generating useful feedback for another attempt next year. I was invited for interview by two of the three universities to which I applied and was subsequently offered a place at Sheffield. I’m really excited about the future and very grateful for the fantastic opportunities I have been given and for the continued support and encouragement of the Division of Psychology at NTU.

News

We are keen to collaborate with individuals, schools and other organisations on matters relating to child psychology. If you are interested in taking part in some of our research, or would like to be kept up to date with what’s happening in the Division, please contact Dr Janine Coates at janine.Coates@ntu.ac.uk with your contact details.

Welcome!

Rebecca Charman has just joined the Division of Psychology, starting her first year of a PhD examining the language and literacy difficulties of children with autism and children with specific learning impairment. We would like to wish her a warm welcome and all the best for her studies.
School of Social Sciences
Nottingham Trent University
Burton Street
Nottingham
NG1 4BU
UK
www.ntu.ac.uk/s3

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