

McGill Psychology

1st Issue | APRIL 2016

behavioural neuroscience | clinical | cognitive neuroscience | developmental | health | quantitative modelling | social & personality

A Message from our Department Chair



“ It has been a great year of celebrating legacies and welcoming outstanding new faculty members. We continue to be endowed with the most selective undergraduates in North America. Their intellectual curiosity and vibrancy is evident everywhere from a 650 student class in Leacock to the 70 students presenting their thesis research at Poster Day. Our graduate students once again garnered the largest percentage of doctoral fellowships of any department in the Faculty of Science and they continue to have a large presence at National and International conferences, presenting their research and winning awards for these presentations. I am grateful to have faculty colleagues who do leading, cutting edge research while also dedicating themselves to teaching and to the general well-being of the department. Along with a devoted support staff, we strive to provide a stimulating, nurturing environment to our students.

“For all that has been, thanks. To all that shall be, yes.” ”

In this ISSUE

- Dr. Jeffrey Mogil's research on the placebo effect is featured in our Spotlight.
- Meet our new Faculty Members!
- McGill Alumnus & Nobel Prize co-winner Dr. John O'Keefe visited us this past summer for a very special Hebb Lecture.
- We say goodbye to our graduating class and give a warm welcome to our new incoming students!

Connect with us:  

Department of Psychology, 1205 Dr Penfield Ave, Montreal, QC, H3A 1B1 | 514-398-6100

In the Spotlight

The Placebo Effect is Getting Stronger



A new study finds that rising placebo responses may play a part in the increasingly high failure rate for clinical trials of drugs designed to control chronic pain caused by nerve damage.

Surprisingly, however, the analysis of clinical trials conducted since 1990 found that the increase in placebo responses occurred only in trials conducted wholly in the U.S.; trials conducted in Europe or Asia showed no changes in placebo responses over that period.

In a paper accepted for publication in the journal *Pain*, researchers in the Department of Psychology at McGill University in Montreal analyzed the results of 84 clinical trials of drugs conducted around the world from 1990 to 2013. Over that period, the pain inhibition experienced by patients in the placebo group increased steadily, reaching an average 30% decrease in pain levels by 2013. Similar increases in placebo response have previously been observed in studies of clinical trials of antidepressants and antipsychotic drugs. Those studies, however, didn't pinpoint the U.S. as the source of the trend.

“Our data suggest that the longer a trial is and the bigger a trial is, the bigger the placebo is going to be”

LONGER, LARGER TRIALS

The authors examined reported features of the clinical trials to determine what factors might be responsible for the changes over time. They found that in the U.S., but not elsewhere, trials are becoming longer (from an average of four-weeks long in 1990 to 12 weeks in 2013) and larger (from an average of fewer than 50 patients in 1990 to an average of more than 700 patients in 2013).

“The data suggest that longer and larger trials are associated with bigger placebo responses,” said Dr. Jeffrey Mogil, the E.P. Taylor Professor of Pain Studies at McGill and senior author of the new paper. “This, in turn, tends to result in the failure of those trials – since it makes it harder for pharmaceutical companies to prove that the drug being tested is more effective than treatment with a placebo.”

THE U.S. AS AN OUTLIER

“It remains to be determined why the United States is an outlier with respect to its clinical trials,” added Alexander Tuttle, a doctoral student in psychology at McGill, and co-first author of the paper. He and his co-authors note, however, some potentially important differences between the U.S. and other countries. These include the existence of direct-to-consumer drug advertising in the U.S. (New Zealand is the only other country in the world that allows this), the greater spread of for-profit “contract research organizations” in the U.S., and perhaps greater exposure to the placebo concept in popular media in the U.S.

“The greater the improvement in patients treated with placebo in clinical trials, the more difficult it can be to demonstrate the beneficial effects of pain-relieving medications,” said Dr. Robert H. Dworkin, Professor of Anesthesiology, Neurology, and Psychiatry at the University of Rochester School of Medicine and Dentistry. Dr. Dworkin, who was not involved in the McGill study, said “This important study increases our understanding of these placebo-group responses, and thereby provides a basis for improving the design of clinical trials and accelerating the development of analgesic medications that can bring greater relief to patients suffering from chronic pain.”

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“It remains to be determined why the United States is an outlier with respect to its clinical trials”

For more on this research:

- Tuttle, A. H., et al. (2015). Increasing placebo responses over time in U.S. clinical trials of neuropathic pain – Journal of Pain.
- American Placebo – McGill Newsroom.
- Why is the Placebo Effect exploding in the U.S. but nowhere else? – Forbes | Pharma & Healthcare.
- Strong placebo response thwarts painkiller trials – Nature News.

Research in the News



If you're happy and you know it, raise your head

McGill Psychology's Dr. Caroline Palmer and Dr. Steven Livingstone have found that people are highly accurate at judging emotions based on head movements alone, even in the absence of sound or facial expressions.



The fear system has evolved to keep us alive

McGill Psychology's Dr. Karim Nader was interviewed by BBC Future on how extreme fear shapes what we remember.



The secret of empathy

President Barack Obama has described an 'empathy deficit' that fuels misunderstanding, divisions, and conflict. McGill Psychology's Dr. Jeffrey Mogil, Dr. Jennifer Bartz, and Dr. Daniel Levitin answer the vital question of how do we create empathy between strangers



Do you want fries with that?

Don't feel bad the next time you're reaching for the brownie you shouldn't be having - your brain has already decided for you. McGill Psychology's Dr. Alain Dagher and Dr. Lesley Fellows discuss their recent work published in Psychological Science.



First languages wires the brain for later learning

McGill Psychology's doctoral student Lara Pierce, Dr. Fred Genesee, and Dr. Denise Klein show that even brief early exposure to a language influences how the brain processes sounds from a second language later in life.

Meet our New Faculty

DR. LAUREN HUMAN

Dr. Human's work examines the causes and consequences of interpersonal impressions, with a focus on the role of individual functioning. Her research examines a range of social contexts, and takes a multi-method approach, integrating lab-based experimental studies and real-world naturalistic designs.



DR. SIGNY SHELDON

Dr. Sheldon's work focuses on understanding how and why we remember events and episodes. She uses behavioural experiments, work with patient populations, and neuroimaging techniques to discover the role of the hippocampus and related brain structures in storing and retrieving episodic memories.



DR. DAVID VACHON

Dr. Vachon's research examines the contribution of individual differences to deviance across the lifespan. He uses a developmental psychopathology approach to understand the role of personality in the etiology of externalizing disorders and disorders of conduct and impulse control.



DR. ANNA WEINBERG

Dr. Weinberg's research focuses on identifying biological pathways that give rise to disordered emotional experience. She uses multiple methodologies to examine neural activity to establish reliable links between function and behavior in healthy populations in a range of mood and anxiety disorders.



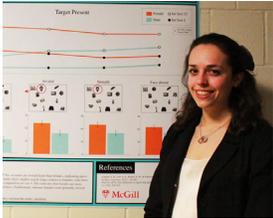
Events & Colloquia



This past summer, we were proud to host University College London's Dr. John O'Keefe, McGill Psychology alumnus and co-winner of the 2014 Nobel Prize in Medicine, for a special Hebb Lecture titled "*The Hippocampus as a Cognitive Map: How we got here and where we are going*".



Thank you to all of our invited speakers for their talks during our annual Hebb, Bindra, and Macnamara Lecture Series. Pictured left to right: Dr. David Redish (University of Minnesota), Dr. Kia Nobre (University of Oxford), Dr. Carol Krumhansl (Cornell University), Dr. Michael Corballis (University of Auckland), Dr. Robert Pihl (McGill University), Dr. Ken Sheldon (University of Missouri).



Our annual Undergraduate Research Day in April gave our students a forum to present their amazing research through poster presentations. Congratulations to everyone involved for a very successful and well-attended event!



A group of McGill Psychology graduate students and post-doctoral fellows hosted a Motivational Research Workshop in the Fall, presenting their research to visiting Hebb Speaker and motivational expert, Dr. Ken Sheldon.

McGill Alumnus Dr. E. Fuller Torrey gave a public lecture this past Fall on how psychology and neuroscience has led the charge in the changing public perception of schizophrenia.

Graduate News



A warm welcome to our incoming class of Psychology and Integrated Program in Neuroscience (IPN) graduate students. Pictured left to right: Rebecca Scheurich, Naomi Vingron, Paul Grunberg, Taylor French, Sarah Peters, Amanda Ravary, Kristina Tchalova, Paige Ethridge, Emily Moore, Sivaniya Subramaniapillai. Not pictured: Alexandra Barnabe, Mallory Frayn, Newman Knowlton, Danielle Rice, Shannon Riley, Sarah Schell, Shannon Tansley.



Congratulations to all of our Ph.D. students for successfully defending their theses this past year. Pictured left to right: Dr. Andrew Abela, Dr. Jamie Cassoff, Dr. Lara Pierce, Dr. Dana Hayward, Dr. Naveed Sheikh, Dr. Nora Hope. Not pictured: Dr. Michael Bodnar, Dr. Sonja Huntgeburth, Dr. Maliha Naeem, Dr. Elia Nahas, Dr. Lance Rappaport, Dr. Simcha Samuel, Dr. Sabina Sarin, Dr. Natsumi Sawada, Dr. Daisy Singla, Dr. Rachel Sutton.



“Convocation is the most wonderful snapshot of the present. It is the culmination of years of hard work and dedication of students; the support and encouragement of friends and family; and the commitment and professionalism of faculty and staff”

Congratulations to our Ph.D. graduates! Pictured left to right: Dr. Frances Aboud, Dr. Daisy Singla, Dr. Lance Rappaport, Dr. Irina Pivneva, Dr. John Lydon, Dr. Veronica Whitford, Dr. Debra Titone, Dr. Catherine Chapados-Noreau.

Undergraduate News



The McGill Psychology Students' Association (MPSA) hosted a fun and successful Welcome Back BBQ in September for faculty and students.



The MPSA published their annual *PSI Journal*, a platform for the insightful research that our undergraduate students completed either independently or through a supervised project.



Trivia Night with Professors was well-attended by faculty members and students alike, as attendees got to test their psychology knowledge and come up with punny team names!

Alumni in the News



Want to change how kids see the world?

Former McGill Psychology Honours student and current Concordia University Professor Dr. Krista Byers-Heinlein spoke to PBS about her research on the effects that bilingualism has on altering children's beliefs about the world around them.



The road to intimacy is faster than a speeding bullet

McGill Psychology Alumnus and current Western University Professor Dr. Albert Katz was featured in Psychonomic Society regarding his research on how we infer non-literal meaning from metaphors, highlighting the importance of literature in developing and understanding human empathy.



Semantically speaking

Former McGill Psychology Ph.D. graduate student and current University of Alberta Professor Dr. Chris Westbury is helping guide the Alberta Chamber of Resources in better understanding public conversations by examining how the use and combination of certain words affects the perception of meaning.

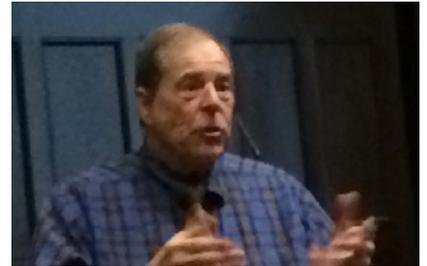


Accountability in research

McGill Psychology Alumnus and current Western University Professor Dr. Marc Joanisse was named chair of the Panel on Responsible Conduct of Research, an interdisciplinary review and advisory body created by the Tri-Council agencies – NSERC, SSHRC, & CIHR.

Announcements

McGill Psychology's Dr. Don Taylor, who has been with our department since 1969, taught his last lecture this December. Dr. Taylor has taught over 30,000 students in his career in his Social Psychology and Intergroup Relations courses, along with imparting his wisdom and knowledge through the years to incoming graduate students in the Psychological Theory course. Thank you Dr. Taylor!



Congratulations to McGill Psychology's Dr. Debra Titone for co-founding the Canadian Chapter of Women in Cognitive Science (WiCSC)! The official launch will occur later this year during the 2016 Meeting of the Canadian Society for Brain, Behaviour, and Cognitive Science (CSBBCS) in Ottawa.



McGill Psychology's departmental website got a facelift this past summer, with a redesigned layout and eye-catching visuals. Visit us and have a look!



We have a great lineup of speakers this year for the Hebb Lecture Series, featuring talks from Stony Brook University's Dr. Daniel Klein and Emory University's Dr. Frans de Waal. Check our website for a full listing of events.



A big thank you to our Support Staff who are integral in keeping our Department running smoothly! Pictured left to right: Laura Pritchett, Giovanna LoCascio, Chantale Bousquet, Nina Pinzarrone.



Your Support



For more than 90 years, we have been graced by a highly diverse and talented array of students. We are proud of our former undergraduates, graduate students, post-doctoral fellows, and non-majors, many of whom have gone on to distinguished careers in psychology, related fields, or other professional endeavors. We are also proud of our long-standing record of excellence in training the next generation of psychologists, neuroscientists, and clinicians, and students who use their knowledge of psychological science to enrich other fields.

Gifts from our alumni and friends provide valuable support for scholarships and student aid, equipment and infrastructure, and research projects and program development. However you choose to support our department, your generosity is both essential and truly appreciated.

Keep in touch!

Hearing from our former students and alumni is important to us, so please keep in touch through our [alumni mailing list](#), and our [twitter](#) and [facebook](#) pages.

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