



Health Psychology in Member Countries

Health Psychology at the University of Stirling, Scotland

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University of Stirling - the place

There are few academic settings more tranquil and picturesque than the University of Stirling in the heart of central Scotland. Overlooking Airthrey Loch and surrounded by lush woodland, the former Airthrey estate provides an environment for research, teaching and living that is the envy of many. The expression 'outstanding beauty' is often applied to the Stirling campus and anyone who has visited will know that this is certainly not the inevitably effusive hyperbole of the University press office. It is simply a statement of fact.

Although Stirling is relatively small when compared to Universities in the major UK urban centres, the modest size of the University affords a number of important benefits. These include more personal working relationships with other research, teaching and administrative staff and easier access and a greater opportunity to engage with all levels of governance in the University. The benefits of making more meaningful connections with all those in the working environment can offset the challenges that are presented by competing against the larger research powerhouses for research funding and attracting the best students. The University has received a number of accolades over the last year, which indicates that it is not just the physical beauty of the place that is noteworthy. The Sunday Times awarded the University the Scottish University of the Year in 2010¹. This award was based on the University's performance on a range of indices, but particularly student focused outcomes. The Department of Psychology at Stirling's recent rating as 8th out of 101 departments in the UK² in the 2011 Guardian University Rankings suggests that smaller institutes like Stirling are capable of punching well above their weight when competing against larger institutes on performance indicators.

Finally an intriguing observation from data derived from the Scottish Neighbourhood Statistics³ shows that the University postcode has the lowest percentage of the population receiving mental health treatments in Scotland. While it remains unclear what exactly is driving this finding, although it is likely to be partly socio-demographic, the University is happy to accept that the exceptional environment and experience that the University provides may account for part of the unusually good mental health profile for the couple of thousand living in FK9 4LA.



Gerry Molloy

Lecturer in Psychology



Rory O'Connor

Professor of Psychology



Ronan O'Carroll

Professor of Psychology



Vivien Swanson

Senior Lecturer in Psychology

Health Psychology in Scotland

Scotland has a very strong tradition in Health Psychology with leading figures in the European Health Psychology Society being based at various Scottish universities over the last 25 years including Professors Derek and Marie Johnston (University of St Andrews and University of Aberdeen), Professor Charles Abraham (University of Dundee), Professor Paschal Sheeran (University of Dundee), Professor Sheina Orbell (University of Dundee and St Andrews) and our very own Professors Ronan O'Carroll and Rory O'Connor. The group in Stirling builds on this tradition and is now taking a leading role in shaping Health Psychology in Scotland and throughout the UK and Europe. The Health Psychology group at Stirling has strong research links both within the University and with academic and clinical colleagues in the main research centres in Aberdeen, Dundee, Edinburgh and Glasgow. There are many challenges to the health of the population in Scotland, and health psychologists at Stirling have developed important collaborative working links with the National Health Service via their research, and also through involvement in a unique government-funded pilot to train stage 2 health psychologists working in health im- ▶

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provement in public health settings.

Health Psychology in Stirling - Research Profiles

The Health Psychology group at Stirling is now the largest core funded Health Psychology research group in Scotland with two full time Professors, a senior lecturer and a lecturer. There are over 20 affiliated staff in the recently established Centre for Health and Behaviour Change, including post-doctoral researchers, research assistants and PhD students and project funding comes from a range of sources including the Chief Scientist's Office in Scotland, Medical Research Council, NHS, British Academy, European Commission, Scottish Government and the Economic and Social Research Council. The department has a leading BPS accredited MSc in Health Psychology. The MSc course includes a short placement in a health care or organisational setting to carry out an evaluation of service provision. This gives students first hand invaluable experience of how health services work in practice and gives a clear advantage in securing employment following graduation. This has been running for several years and there are also a wide range of modules offered to undergraduates on topics related to Health Psychology. We also have a dedicated Health Psychology laboratory in the Department. This is a well equipped facility with a range of features dedicated to laboratory based Health Psychology. The teaching staff are Chartered Psychologists with the British Psychological Society and registered Health Psychologists with the Health Professionals Council.

Professor O'Carroll, who is the current vice-president of the United Kingdom Society of Behavioural Medicine and a practising clinical and health psychologist, has a diverse portfolio of research that encompasses behavioural medicine (e.g. adherence, organ transplantation, prediction of outcome following medical and surgical interventions), memory and emotion and clinical neuropsychology. Ronan has recently been the chair of the thriving British Psychological Society Division of Health Psychology – Scotland. He currently holds a number of project grants as Principal Investigator supporting his work.

Professor Rory O'Connor is broadly interested in self-regulation processes and health outcomes and he leads the Suicidal Behaviour Research Group at Stirling, the only dedicated suicide/self-harm research group in Scotland. The overarching aim of the research conducted within the group is to apply theoretical models derived from different areas of psychology (including health and clinical psychology) to enhance our understanding of self-harm and suicide. He applies health psychological models (including Theory of Planned

Behaviour, Self-regulatory Model, Transtheoretical Model) to enhance our understanding of suicide/self-harm. Rory's work has been funded by both UK and European sources.

Dr Vivien Swanson, who is the director of the MSc in Health Psychology, conducts research on a range of topics including stress and health, infant feeding (including applying psychological models of behaviour change to breastfeeding and developing self-efficacy in parents of premature infants) diet and obesity and diabetes. Over the last 10 years Dr Swanson has sat on several governmental advisory groups in relation to infant feeding and diabetes, and is the current chair of the British Psychological Society, Division of Health Psychology – Scotland.

Dr Gerry Molloy is the most recent member to join the team taking up a lectureship in April 2009 after posts as post-doctoral research fellow at University College London and the University of Aberdeen. His research focuses on the health effects of providing and receiving social support and issues relating to informal care for older adults with activity limitations due to cardiovascular disease. In particular he is interested in the question, 'How do others in our immediate ongoing social environment influence health and illness?' particularly in older age and in adaptation to chronic illness.

This rich and diverse portfolio of Health Psychology research provides a stimulating academic environment for PhD students, early career researchers and Professorial research leaders alike. The department hosts many visiting researchers and welcomes applications from those that can contribute to and benefit from the various programmes of research to become official visiting scholars. Indeed potential PhD students are encouraged to contact the academic staff to discuss potential PhD topics and potential funders.

Health Psychology in Stirling - the future

The field of Health Psychology increasingly acknowledges that the discipline has now reached the point in its development where it has to prove its worth in terms of delivering and evaluating theory-based interventions that aim to improve health and well-being, and with this in mind The Centre for Health and Behaviour Change has this as a key objective for new programmes of research over the next 5-10 years. Our current and planned studies in this area include the following:

- Interventions to improve self-efficacy in parents of premature babies and to motivate mothers to initiate and maintain breastfeeding.
- Interventions to enhance adherence to medica-▶



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tion in patients with cardiovascular disease by modifying beliefs about medications and improving self-regulatory skills⁴.

- Increasing sign-up on the organ donor registry via tackling emotional barriers to registration.
- Using brief psychological interventions e.g. volitional health sheets, to reduce self-harm⁵.

We believe that the discipline of Health Psychology has an important role to play in improving population health and that the University of Stirling can be an internationally leading centre for science and practice in this area. Later in 2010 the University of Stirling will formally launch The Centre for Health and Behaviour Change. The Centre will provide the foundation and structure for the long term future of the discipline at the University and play a key role in demonstrating that Health Psychologists have the knowledge and skills to make a difference to public health.

For more and up-to-date information on Health Psychology at Stirling and The Centre for Health and Behaviour Change, please visit our web pages which can be found at:

<http://www.psychology.stir.ac.uk> ■

1. http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/life_and_style/education/sunday_times_university_guide/article6831996.ece
2. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/table/2010/jun/04/university-guide-psychology>
3. <http://www.sns.gov.uk/default.aspx>
4. <http://www.biomedcentral.com/1471-2377/10/15>
5. <http://www.psychology.stir.ac.uk/research/SBRG/index.php>

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