Summary

I study human behaviour in the context of our evolutionary history. My work has concentrated on perception of social properties of faces, particularly attractiveness. A lot of this work is strongly influenced by theories of sexual selection proposed by evolutionary biologists. I also have strong interests in the perception of emotion and the social perception of personality.

Recent and ongoing projects

Dynamic Beauty: studying social impressions with realistic stimuli

Leverhulme Trust Research Grant (Jan 2011- Jan 2013)

Dynamic stimuli convey more information with better ecological validity than static stimuli. We will create a large, dynamic stimulus set of walkers to authoritatively assess how different biometric and psychometric measures predict bodily attractiveness. We will also explore related social perception issues, such as how dynamic and postural sexual signalling affects perceptions of attractiveness, and associations between psychometric measures, behavioural cues and mechanical properties of motion. The stimulus set will be made available to other researchers interested in social perception, biological motion, and gait analysis, ultimately enabling further work in disciplines ranging from robotics to research in body image.

Investigations of sensitivity to facial expressions of emotion during pregnancy and post-partum


Growing evidence suggests that women's perception of emotional expressions varies as a result of hormonal activity. For example, it has been demonstrated that women have better recognition of fearful facial expressions at stages of the menstrual cycle when oestrogen levels are high, and that expressions signalling nearby danger or contagion are more salient when progesterone is elevated. Functional (evolutionary) explanations for these phenomena suggest that such shifts in social perception may be adaptations to reduce the risk of disease or physical threat damaging the foetus during pregnancy, but no systematic work examining facial expression perception across pregnancy has been carried out to date. The research outlined here proposes to perform a longitudinal study of women across pregnancy to test adaptationist hypotheses of variability in the social perception of emotional expression.

Dynamic cues of proceptivity, signal direction, and their influence on attractiveness judgements

ESRC research grant (December 2006 – November 2008). With Andrew Clark.

Attractiveness is a fundamental variable in our social lives, exerting considerable influence on our personal and professional relationships. Evolutionary approaches have proved fruitful in investigating this issue. Appearance affects attractiveness because physical structure conveys information about mate value (the long- and short-term reproductive benefits associated with a partner). Dyadic behaviour also provides information to potential mates, but has received less
attention in evolutionary research. In this project, we are conducting a series of studies investigating the interactions between proceptivity, direction of signal, and the sex of both the receiver and signaller.

**Effects of alcohol consumption on processing of perceptual cues of emotional expression**

AERC research grant (March 2007 – February 2008), With Marcus Munafo, Christopher Benton & Angela Attwood.

There is substantial current concern, in part following liberalisation of licensing laws in the UK, regarding the effects of alcohol on aggressive behaviour and violent crime. Our proposed research will inform this debate, and investigate the effects of alcohol on social perception, a potentially causal factor in aggressive behaviour. We aim to determine whether acute alcohol consumption in social alcohol users induces differences in sensitivity to perceptual cues of facial emotional expression.

**Cross-cultural investigations of strategic face preferences in humans**

Leverhulme Trust research grant (October 2006 – September 2009). With Steven Josephson and Isabel Scott

Evolutionary biological models of mate preference have informed both psychological and anthropological studies of human facial attractiveness. Our increasing understanding of these preferences has produced new hypotheses predicting variability in preferences across varying ecologies and cultures. This project will integrate psychological tests with anthropological data from multiple populations to demonstrate how preference mechanisms produce biologically meaningful variability in response to the physical and social environment. Such novel interdisciplinary findings will represent an empirical and theoretical advance in psychology, biology and anthropology.

**Adult attachment and the perceptual processing of facial expressions of emotion**

ESRC research grant (June 2006 – May 2009). With Angela Rowe, Casimir Ludwig & Robbie Cooper

High quality close relationships are important for emotional well-being and mental health. A critical factor influencing relationships across the life span is attachment style. Attachment styles are relationship representations containing a model of self and other in relationships and interactional scripts. They derive from interactions with caregivers during development and are activated in relationship-relevant situations, guiding behaviour, cognition and affect regulation. Insecure attachment styles are associated with poor relationship quality and psychological maladjustment. Attachment styles also influence the processing of emotional, yet the psychological mechanisms underpinning these processing differences are currently poorly specified. By using methodologies including psychophysics, attentional tasks and eye-tracking, we aim to explore these mechanisms.

**Biography**

I studied for my first degree (B.A. Psych) at the University of Manchester from 1991-94. I stayed at Manchester for my M.Sc. which investigated human timing behaviour (scalar timing and internal clocks) with Professor John Wearden. I then moved to St. Andrews, initially to teach research methods and subsequently to study for my Ph.D. under the supervision of Professor Dave Perrett. Since completing my Ph.D., I’ve lectured at St. Andrews and Stirling Universities. I moved to Bristol as a Senior Lecturer in August 2004.

**Activities / Findings**

Effects of Alcohol on Rating of Attractiveness: Examining the role of alcohol in social interaction, Investigations of sensitivity to facial expressions of emotion during pregnancy and post-partum, Dynamic cues of proceptivity, signal direction, and their influence on attractiveness judgements, cross-cultural investigations of strategic face preferences in Humans

**Teaching**

Experimental Psychology:

- Year 2: Critical Issues in Psychology
- Year 3: Evolutionary Psychology

**Keywords**

- Evolutionary psychology
- Face perception

**Processes and functions**

- Sexual selection
- Mate choice

**Methodologies**

- Psychophysics

**Expertise**
I study human behaviour in the context of our evolutionary history. My work has concentrates on perception of social properties of faces, particularly attractiveness. A lot of this work is strongly influenced by theories of sexual selection proposed by evolutionary biologists. I also have strong interests in the perception of emotion and the social perception of personality. Recent and ongoing projects Currently, I’m working on several externally funded projects: Effects of Alcohol on Rating of Attractiveness: Examining the role of alcohol in social interaction. European Research Advisory Board Grant EA 08 20. (2009-2010) ?60,000. With Marcus Munafo, M.R. This grant continues our investigations of the influence that alcohol may have on the social perception of faces.

- human behaviour
- evolutionary history
- social properties of faces
- attractiveness
- sexual selection
- perception of emotion
- social perception of personality

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- Cognitive science

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- Cognitive science > Social cognition group

Recent publications


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Networks & contacts

- Marcus Munafo
• Chris Benton
• Andrew Clarke
• Dave Perrett
• Jonathan Evens
• Rebecca Pearson