HumSci News

Keeping Friends of Human Sciences in touch

2024–5 Edition

Introduction from the Head of the Institute

My second year as Head of the Institute has seen much consolidation of the good work and development about which I wrote last year. The new colleagues mentioned last year have all settled well into teaching and I've become aware of a growing sense of unity of purpose, of collegiality and a spirit of collaboration within the Institute that wasn't always present. This is reflected, for example, in a greater willingness of colleagues to think creatively about the connections between their own disciplines and the others that constitute Human Sciences. When I started teaching for Human Sciences over 25 years ago, I was told that interdisciplinarity was an aspiration, an 'emergent property' that, if one was lucky, developed in the minds of students; but rarely would we be able or encouraged to make those links ourselves for students. That has all changed. Many of us make explicit links frequently in our lectures and tutorials. Links such as those between climate change, human and planetary health, or between public health and social cohesion, or between biological and cultural diversity and their significance for nature conservation policy. There are many likely reasons for the improved sense of direction in the Institute, but I am sure that the presence now of APTF appointments (see last year's news) whose core teaching activity is for the BA in Human Sciences has been a cause. Further stimulus came no doubt from the focus of the Vice-Chancellor's oration on the world's need for interdisciplinarity. Whilst in conversation with her it became clear that she views interdisciplinarity as an emergent property that arises from teams of differentiated specialists working together, rather than academics with a breadth of understanding, as embodied by Human Scientists, nevertheless the seed is sown. Perhaps we still have a way to go to convince the world of the need for graduates with a breadth of vision and understanding, but at least in the VC's case her interaction with Prof Sir Simon (see below) may have helped.

I can vouch personally for the value of the broader perspective that comes from engagement with Human Sciences. With a professional background in ecology, and especially ornithology, as well as plant taxonomy and nature conservation, it was being directed in the 1990s to give 8 introductory lectures in ecology to the first-year Human Scientists that made me explore the significance of the human influence on the species I studied. That exploration, which involved reflecting on my own assumptions as a human observer, led me to question much of what I thought I knew. That all led me to a significant career shift into Ethno-ornithology, ultimately to become the world's first Professor of the field. I owe so much of that career path to my engagement with Human Sciences, and especially to the many brilliant students I've taught ecology and evolution to since 1998 (perhaps you are one), that it was real joy to bring some of that home for the Meeting Minds Alumni event in October. There, I lectured on Ethno-ornithology and indigenous ecological knowledge, and how Charles Darwin's understanding of the process of evolution said more about his own time, nationality and culture than about the complex biological processes of adaptation that are

recognised today – processes being described as Neo-Lamarckian to rival the increasingly discredited Neo-Darwinian framing of the evolutionary process.

As I write, however, at the end of Trinity Term 2025, further exciting developments for Human Sciences are in the offing. Having made an important appointment to an APTF in Evolutionary Anthropology to convene Paper 1 of the Final Honours School, we await the arrival in Oxford of the new appointee, whose welcome we shall report in next year's HumSci News. Similarly an MOU signed between the School of Anthropology and Department of Sociology to provide teaching for Human Sciences has brought stability to the teaching provision for Quantitative Methods and Sociology, and will soon deliver a new APTF post in Demography. Again, we shall report their arrival and welcomes next year, but I shall record our thanks here once again to Profs David Gellner and David Pratten for laying the foundations for these posts for us (see HumSci News 2023), and also to Prof Clare Harris, who took over from David Pratten in Michaelmas Term 2024 as Head of the School of Anthropology. She has already shown herself a strong supporter of the Human Sciences programme, for which we are most grateful. Somewhat absent from HumSci News over many years has been mention of the contributions made to the degree by the Department of Biology (formerly the Departments of Zoology and Plant Sciences), from whence I came. With the opening soon of the new Life and Mind Building (LaMB: https://lifeandmind.web.ox.ac.uk/), which will house all of Biology and Psychology, and the appointment of a Head of Department for Biology with a keen interest in Human Sciences, I expect to be able to report next year on further exciting developments for Human Sciences coming from that direction. Recalling that the founders of Human Sciences were a Zoologist and an Anthropologist, perhaps next year we shall be able to say that Human Sciences is becoming what its founders always believed it should be – the jewel in Oxford's crown.

With best wishes and thanks as ever for all you do to fly the Human Sciences flag in the world,

Andy Gosler, July 2025

Revd. Prof. Andrew Gosler is Head of the Institute of Human Sciences, Professor of Ethno-ornithology and a Fellow of Mansfield College. https://www.biology.ox.ac.uk/people/andrew-gosler His lecture *Knowing and Naming: The roots of Ethno-ornithology* first given at the Linnean Society in London in January 2024, can been seen here https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N2HjVLLTOsc

Congratulations to

Professor Sir Simon Baron-Cohen who has been made an honorary fellow of the Royal Society of Medicine in recognition to his contribution to health, healthcare and medicine. Professor Baron-Cohen read Human Sciences at New College from 1978 to 1981 before completing an MPhil in clinical psychology at the Institute of Psychiatry, King's College London and a PhD in psychology at University College, London. He is Professor of Developmental Psychopathology at the University of Cambridge, Director of the Autism Research Centre and Fellow of Trinity College, Cambridge. On receiving this honour, Sir Simon thanked his team of researchers at the Autism Research for "their hard work into both basic science into trying to understand the cause of autism but also applied research to evaluate what kind of support might help autistic people and their families." One of the other six leading scientists who became honorary fellows of the Royal Society on 23 July 2024, along with Sir Simon, was Oxford University's Vice-Chancellor, Irene Tracey CBE.

Naomi Freud who was elected as Pro-Master of St Catherine's College, Oxford from 1st January 2025 to 22nd April 2025 when the new Master, Jude Kelly, CBE, took up her appointment. Naomi read Human Sciences at St Catherine's from 1985 to 1988 and was Director of Studies for Human Sciences at St Catherine's College from 2010 to 2023, continuing as Fellow and Director of Studies for Visiting Students in the college. She has served in many administrative roles within Human Sciences including Head of the Institute, Chair of FHS Examiners and Admissions Co-ordinator. Naomi succeeds Professor Bart van Es, Professor of English Literature at Oxford and Fellow of St Catherine's College, who has served as Pro-Master following the retirement of Professor Kersti Bőrjars who retired as Master at the end of Trinity Term 2024.

Professor David Gellner who was elected as a Fellow of the British Academy which recognises leading scholars in the Humanities and Social Sciences. David Gellner was Professor of Social Anthropology and Fellow of All Souls College until his retirement in September 2024. David Gellner has made a huge contribution to Human Sciences in recent years as the Head of the Institute from 2020 to 2023 when he oversaw our 50th anniversary celebrations as well as the launch of our development campaign, which is ongoing, to secure the future of Human Sciences. After stepping down as Head of the Institute of Human Sciences, David continued his tireless work to support the continuation of Human Sciences in the role of Director of Academic Development and I know he has had contact with many of you over the last year or so about the vision for the future of Human Sciences and how alumni can support this. Although David retired from his statutory professorship in September, he remains supportive of Human Sciences and we are delighted he will be chairing the Human Sciences talk by Hannah Gardner at the 2025 Meeting Minds Alumni weekend on Saturday 20th September 2025 (see below).

Joshua Parker Allen who received the Early Career Researcher Prize co-awarded by the journal *Medicine Anthropology Theory (MAT)* and the Medical Anthropology Europe (MAE) association. Josh read Human Sciences at St Catherine's College from 2015 to 2018. After graduating he worked as a research assistant for La Univesidad de los Andes in Bogotá Colombia before returning to Oxford to read for an M.Phil. in Development Studies in the Department of International Development (ODID) He completed a D.Phil. at ODID and St Antony's College. His research studies how large, transnational global health research programmes, which conduct research in Uganda, but which are managed from universities in the US and UK produce knowledge. He is interested in how inequalities in research design, implementation, analysis, and findings-dissemination shape what ends up being 'known' about HIV/AIDS. Josh's work contributes to the burgeoning field of 'research on research' in critical global health, and draws on both medical anthropology and science and technology studies.

Phoebe Reynolds (nee Whitehead) who was the winner of the British Neuroscience Association Public Engagement Award 2024 for extraordinary public engagement in neuroscience. Phoebe read Human Sciences at St Catherine's College from 2017 to 2020 during which she organised a Human Sciences Symposium on Consciousness. After graduating, Phoebe joined the Medical Research Council's Doctoral Training Programme at King's College London which focussed on interdisciplinary research and allowed her to rotate across research areas to find the areas she was most interested in, exploring techniques and meeting supervisors before choosing her PhD topic. Her PhD, under the supervision of Professor Robert Hindges looks at visual plasticity and behaviour. Phoebe created and led The Brave Little Neuron, an educational pantomime that translates complex neurodevelopmental research into a fun and interactive format which has reached hundreds of

individuals and elevated neuroscience into the public discourse. Phoebe is also a trustee for In2ScienceUK, where she has shaped initiatives that offer underrepresented students hands-on experiences in STEM, and has also contributed to the development of the In2research programme to help students from diverse backgrounds pursue postgraduate research. Her commitment to inclusivity is reflected in her involvement in science events such as Science ShowOff where she uses humour and creativity to make neuroscience more approachable. Phoebe said "*I am thrilled to receive the BNA Public Engagement Award 2024. The prize highlights the importance of connecting neuroscience with society, and the recognition celebrates not just my efforts but the incredible teams and communities I've had the privilege to work with. Human Science's unique combination of biological and social sciences taught me to see neuroscience as a human story that should be shared widely, and gave me opportunities to explore it from unique perspectives."*

Meeting Minds Alumni Events

The Human Sciences talk at the 2024 Meeting Minds Alumni weekend was given by our very own Head of the Institute and Professor of Ethno-ornithology, Professor Andrew Gosler. In his lecture on 'Knowing and Naming: The roots of Ethno-ornithology' Andy explored how studies of biological and linguistics diversity can help us to understand both the process of biological evolution and the value of biocultural diversity itself.

For this year's Meeting Minds, we are delighted to welcome Human Sciences and Wadham Alumna, Hannah Gardner who will be talking about the 'Global Centre of Malnutrition: Gender, Growth and Government Action in South Asia' In this talk, Hannah will look at why South Asia continues to experience higher levels of malnutrition than any other world region, even after decades of rapid economic growth. She will explore women's social status, intergenerational legacies of poor nutrition and the tools governments are now scaling-up to combat the region's most stubborn forms of malnutrition – micronutrient deficiencies. Hannah is a consultant with the World Health Organisation. The talk will be introduced by Professor David Gellner, Emeritus Professor of Social Anthropology and former Head of the Institute of Human Sciences, who is an expert in the Anthropology of South Asia.

Hope: 2024 Symposium

For the 2024 Symposium, the students chose the theme of Hope. This was, as always, addressed from a variety of disciplinary perspectives. Professor David Chandler, Professor of International Relations at the University of Westminster spoke about 'Hope after the end of "Man" constructing new genres of the Human' with the Institute's Professor Eben Kirksey speaking on 'Figures of Hope: From Blasted Landscapes to Biotech Futures' and Dr Athar Yawar (Director of Studies for Human Sciences at St Catherine's College) speaking on 'Hope and Healing in a Fallen World'.

2024 Prize Winners

The 2024 Gibbs Prize for the best performance in the Final Honour School of Human Sciences was awarded to Rosie Quint (Keble College) with *Proxime Accessit* prizes being granted to Bella Malvisi (St John's), Sam Marks (St Catherine's) and Lara Maton (Hertford).

The joint winners of the Wilma Crowther Prize for the best dissertation were Philip Lehndorff (St Catherine's College) for his dissertation on 'Mortality and the Machine: Exploring the relationship between deindustrialisation, reinvestment, and health outcomes in the UK' and Candace Williams (Regent's Park College) for her dissertation on 'Life, death and in-between for the 'Black maternal' – How can we understand birthing trauma from an intergenerational perspective?' (You can read more about Candace's dissertation below.)

The Iain Morley Prize for the best interdisciplinary dissertation was awarded to Francesca Kuczynska for her dissertation on 'The role of puberty in the formation of self-identity in pre-professional ballet dancers'.

The Bob Hiorns Prize for performance in the Preliminary Examination in Human Sciences was awarded to Edward de Bono (St Hugh's College), Leela Downward (Keble College) and Katherine Ward (Magdalen College).

Candace Williams on the process of writing her prize winning dissertation

We spoke to recent graduate Candace Williams about the process of writing her dissertation entitled 'Life, death and in-between for the 'Black maternal' – How can we understand birthing trauma from an intergenerational perspective?'

How do you feel about winning the Wilma Cowther Prize?

I am honoured to receive the Wilma Crowther Prize for my dissertation. I sought to give voice to Black women from Britain's African Caribbean communities who have experienced birthing trauma. My aim was to bring attention to this overlooked issue within academic circles, thus, shedding further insight on this important subject matter.

Candace Williams and her dissertation

What was your inspiration?

I was first made aware of this issue through watching Channel Four's dispatches documentary 'The Black Maternity Scandal' that investigated birthing trauma for Black women in Britain. I was aware that inequalities in birthing outcomes for Black women persisted in the United States, however, I was shocked at the prevalence of this issue within the United Kingdom, particularly as Britain is a welfare state. Therefore, I was inclined to investigate the biopsychosocial factors that lead to differences in birthing outcomes for Black women in Britain.

How did you construct your dissertation?

After watching the documentary, I investigated the ongoing research which is being conducted in this area. This was accomplished through engaging with online Black maternal campaigning groups and conducting further reading in the summer between my second and third year. Attending FiveXMore's Women's Health Summit, in September 2023, further fuelled my passion for this topic. The mix of personal stories and expert insights I gained through attending this conference highlighted the need to discuss this issue.

I discovered that inequalities in birthing outcomes for Black women in Britain was first documented in public health records in the year 1994. However, through reading further literature and conducting my own qualitative research, it was evident that birthing trauma has existed for Black women in Britain prior to this date. Thus, my research spanned across several decades of Black birthing accounts, where similarities and differences in birthing narratives were discussed.

I'm incredibly grateful for the support I received along the way. My amazing community of family and friends inspired me not to give up. Their encouragement reminded me that my work has purpose and significance. I am thrilled that my efforts have been recognised in such a monumental way.

What advice would you give to other students who are thinking of writing their dissertations?

Three key pieces of advice I would give are:

Start early. I began my research in the summer between my second and third year, allowing me the time to explore the topic deeply without feeling rushed. This approach helped me to do the subject justice.

Your voice is a powerful tool, use it. As a young Black woman, I aimed to bring a fresh and distinctive perspective to academia. Studying Human Sciences gave me the freedom to draw from interdisciplinary backgrounds to explore this subject matter in a unique way and integrate stories from my community. I encourage students to do the same when choosing their dissertation topics.

Above all, enjoy the process. Writing a dissertation is a wonderful opportunity to explore a topic that matters to you and one which you find interesting. While it may seem daunting at first, embrace the freedom writing your dissertation offers.

COP29: A student Perspective

By Ushika Kidd, Third Year Human Scientist and President of the Oxford Climate Society

The pipeline from Human Sciences into public health appears self-evident, even without regard for the many instances we are asked ‘what is Human Sciences? Is it medical?’ I like to think though, that what makes this degree unique is that its diversity not only prepares us for a more informed and holistic entryway into ameliorating the health sector, but the very interdisciplinarity encouraged by the subject demonstrates the relevance of human decisions to all conversations, and other global problems to be scrutinised under the Human Scientist’s gaze.

This year, I attended the first week of COP29, representing Oxford Climate Society as co-president, the Oxford delegation, and the Global Alliance of Universities on Climate as a youth ambassador. The experience was a summit in multiple ways; one of several highlights of being involved in climate action in Oxford, but also, a significant point in what I plan will be my long-term endeavour beyond Human Sciences – a milestone that is approaching fast with six months left to go! In a misleadingly neat and seamless table overview accounting for every minute of my time in Azerbaijan that I constructed in the weeks after returning, apart from indicating the wide range of events it was possible to attend (negotiations, roundtables, plenaries, side events), there were also a few themes that I ended up prioritising, given it was impossible to follow absolutely everything. Therefore, I found myself attending a series of consultations related to national adaptation plans (NAPs), small islands developing states, loss and damage, and especially, the integration of the climate and health

agendas. The latter was a particularly enriching aspect to follow, given the grounding Human Sciences has, and I had the opportunity to join a small group discussion with other delegates from the YOUNGO health working group and the IFMSA (International Federation of Medical Students Associations), and Dr Maria Neira, an inspiring physician and diplomat who is currently the Director of Environment, Climate Change, and Health at the World Health Organisation. With the launch of the COP29 Special Report on Climate Change and Health claiming that "Health is the Argument for Climate Action" (which also made its way onto my Oxford Public Health society profile, currently a de facto Human Sciences society given the Human Scientist committee domination), it was gratifying to see a clear path for Human Scientists into the climate sphere.

However, I began this reflection by stating that Human Sciences and public health are already popularly conflated. Health may be a powerful argument for Human Scientists – and professionals – to step into environmental action, as exhibited by OCS member Ashima Gulati's guest presentation at OxPH (Oxford Public Health) Journal Club this MT24, where she presented her current research on policy reforms at the intersection of climate, education, and health. I would take this a step further to argue that Human Sciences, not just health, is a lens in itself we can carry forward into any sector. Speaking from my own experience, I chose this course based on an environmental reading of the Course Structure: ecology and evolution, check. Anthropological and geographical foundations, check. Quantitative methods for statistical analysis and potentially climate data, check. Demography for population policy and systems approach, Human Ecology for ethnobiology, biopolitics, human-nature analysis, check and check. Biological conservation option, the cherry on top to a clearly environmental degree, with added benefits of interdisciplinarity and ability to synthesise individual, population, and planetary health, double tick! Although I am not advocating we all go to COP any time soon (although a Human Sciences delegation would be unbeatable), the diversity of people and backgrounds of those who do go demonstrate an important point about how we bridge personal, academic, and professional interests. We are just as equipped to tackle the climate crisis as we are to go into medicine, human rights law, public health research, to name a few (heard straight through the grapevine). Any one of these, in turn, are inextricably linked to environmental issues. My final point, then: the Climate Crisis is the Argument for Human (Scientists) Action.

Study shows brains grew faster as humans evolved

New research led by Dr Thomas Püschel overturns long-standing ideas about human brain evolution

Modern humans, Neanderthals, and other recent relatives on our human family tree evolved bigger brains much more rapidly than earlier species, a new study of human brain evolution has found. The study, published in the journal PNAS, found that brain size increased gradually within each ancient human species rather than through sudden leaps between species.

Researchers assembled the largest-ever dataset of ancient human fossils spanning 7 million years and used advanced computational and statistical methods to account for gaps in the fossil record. These innovative approaches provided the most comprehensive view yet of how brain size evolved over time. The research challenges old ideas that some species, like Neanderthals, were unchanging and unable to adapt and instead highlights gradual and continuous change as the driving force behind brain size evolution.

Dr Thomas Püschel, Associate Professor in Evolutionary Anthropology at the School of Anthropology and Museum Ethnography, lead author of the study, said: “Big evolutionary changes don’t always need dramatic events. They can happen through small, gradual improvements over time, much like how we learn and adapt today.”

Professor Chris Venditti, co-author of the study from the University of Reading, said: "This study completely changes our understanding of how human brains evolved. It was previously thought that brain size jumps dramatically between species, like new upgrades between the latest computer models. Our study instead shows a steady, incremental ‘software update’ happening within each species over millions of years.”

The researchers also uncovered a striking pattern: while larger-bodied species generally had bigger brains, the variation observed within an individual species did not consistently correlate with body size. Brain size evolution across long evolutionary timescales extending millions of years is therefore shaped by different factors to those observed within individual species – highlighting the complexity of evolutionary pressures on brain size.

The study, completed while Dr Püschel was at the University of Reading, was produced as part of a £1 million Research Leadership Awards grant from the Leverhulme Trust. The project was to better understand the evolution of human ancestors.

Read the full study: Püschel, T. A., Nicholson, S. L., Baker, J., Barton, R. A., & Venditti, C. (2024). Hominin brain size increase has emerged from within-species encephalization. Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, 121(49), e2409542121.

Former Human Sciences Tutor creates Niche Construction Website

Dr John Olding, Emeritus Fellow of, and former Director of Studies for Human Sciences at, Mansfield College, has created a website nicheconstruction.com which provides a valuable resource for academics, students and individuals interested in the topic of niche construction. The website provides an accessible introduction to the topic of niche construction, explaining what it is and how it is being used across multiple academic fields. John is a leading authority on niche construction theory and the author of *Niche Construction. How Life Contributes to Its Own Evolution*. John writes:

‘In evolution, natural selection selects variant organisms in evolving populations. However, niche constructing organisms reciprocate by modifying some of the natural selection pressures they encounter in their environments. They thereby contribute to their own and each other’s evolution in ways that are not yet fully captured by the standard theory of evolution. This point is particularly relevant to the social and human sciences, given that humans are by far the most potent niche constructors on earth today’.

Using Genomics to Identify Antibiotic Resistant Gonorrhoea

Dr Teresa Street takes us behind the scenes of her latest publication **‘**Target enrichment improves culture-independent detection of Neisseria gonorrhoeae and antimicrobial resistance determinants direct from clinical samples with Nanopore sequencing’ published in *Microbial Genomics.*

My name is Teresa Street and in addition to being the Departmental Lecturer for Genetics in the Institute of Human Sciences, I’m a senior postdoctoral scientist in the Modernising Medical Microbiology (MMM) research group, part of the Nuffield Department of Medicine. MMM aims to

transform how we analyse and treat infections so we can improve patient care. For the last few years, we've worked on studies that try to develop better ways of detecting bacterial infections and predicting antibiotic resistance using DNA sequencing.

Our latest study focused on detecting gonorrhoea in patient samples. Gonorrhoea is a common sexually transmitted infection, caused by the bacteria *Neisseria gonorrhoeae*. It is usually successfully treated with a combination of two antibiotics. Increasingly, there are more cases arising where these two antibiotics are no longer effective at treating gonorrhoea, as the bacteria has developed resistance to them. This resistance has been detected globally, making gonorrhoea a significant public health risk.

To tackle this problem, we need to be able to identify and treat infections quickly: early detection and faster treatment will help control the spread of antibiotic-resistant strains. Gonorrhoea is usually detected by collecting urine or a swab sample from patients and then growing any bacteria contained within the samples in a laboratory. If bacteria do grow, further tests can be done to identify which antibiotics will successfully kill them. Scientists also do molecular tests (PCR), which involve trying to detect DNA from the gonorrhoea bacteria. It can take a while to get the results back from all of these tests as often bacteria can take a few days to grow. A single test that could be done much faster, and which would identify both whether a gonorrhoea infection is present and which antibiotics would treat it best would allow the correct treatment for each patient to be started sooner. This, in turn, would reduce the onward transmission of gonorrhoea. This is particularly important in those cases where the bacteria is resistant to multiple antibiotics.

Recently, a molecular method called Metagenomic Sequencing, or mNGS, has shown potential as a new diagnostic test. It utilises next generation sequencing (NGS) technologies to identify DNA from bacteria directly from patient samples, without needing to grow the bacteria in a laboratory first. The bacterial DNA can be identified by comparing it to a database of many known bacterial sequences, and this helps to identify the bacteria causing an infection. If we can extract enough bacterial DNA from a sample, not only can mNGS work out which type of bacteria is causing the infection, but it can also identify specific parts of its DNA that we know lead to antibiotic resistance (AMR). mNGS can also be faster than current tests, often detecting the cause of an infection and which treatments will work within a few hours. In this way we have the potential for a single test that both identifies the cause of infection and gives us information about which antibiotics will (or won't) treat it much faster than current methods.

In a previous study we tested the ability of mNGS to detect *N. gonorrhoeae* directly from urine samples. We were able to detect gonorrhoea and in some cases also see some AMR determinants. mNGS can, however, sometimes be hampered by high levels of host contamination: DNA extracted from a clinical sample will contain DNA from the patient as well as from any bacteria. This limits the detection of bacterial DNA in our sequence data and makes it more difficult to identify AMR determinants. We observed this in our previous work, and so our latest study tested a method to enrich for gonorrhoea before sequencing.

We used a technique called Target Enrichment to capture any gonorrhoea DNA in our extracts before sequencing. This involves designing probes – short sequences of RNA that are complementary to specific regions of the target DNA. In this case our target DNA was the *N. gonorrhoeae* genome and we also focussed on known AMR determinants, including probes that match to these known sequences. By mixing the probes with DNA extracted from patient samples they will selectively hybridize, or bind, to their complementary gonorrhoea target sequences. Subsequent steps remove the unbound DNA (which we hoped would be human and any other

bacterial DNA), increasing the relative abundance of the gonorrhoea DNA compared to non-target DNA in the sample. In this way we should be able to enrich for gonorrhoea over the human DNA.

We tested this enrichment method for gonorrhoea-positive urine and urethral swab samples. Our results demonstrated a substantial improvement in the proportion of DNA sequences classified as *N. gonorrhoeae* in comparison to the same sample without enrichment. This enhanced genome coverage enabled detection of AMR determinants in chromosomal genes that are known to confer resistance, and we were able to predict the resistance seen by the laboratory to certain antibiotics in our samples. We also tested the feasibility of multiplexing, where multiple samples were pooled, enriched and sequenced simultaneously, to improve efficiency and reduce the costs associated with enrichment and sequencing. We obtained enough genome coverage to detect AMR determinants in these samples, too.

We hope our results have shown the usefulness of enrichment for detecting gonorrhoea directly from patient samples without needing to culture it in the laboratory first. We were even able to detect an AMR determinant in a sample which did not grow in the laboratory and so didn't have a recommendation for which antibiotic would be best to kill it. We think this really highlights the utility of mNGS for looking at infections where bacteria are difficult to grow in a laboratory.

This article first appeared on the Microbiology Website on 27 March 2024

Student Insight: Unlocking Industry Collaborations for the Social Sciences (Workshop 11th June 2024)

By Grace White, Third Year Student in BA in Human Sciences at Keble College, University of Oxford

I had the privilege of attending the Unlocking Industry Collaborations for the Social Sciences Workshop, organised by Dr Francesco Rampazzo, Lecturer in Demography, in early June, held in the University of Oxford's Department of Sociology. I was invited as a current undergraduate reading Human Sciences at the University, with a particular interest in the Demography and Sociology modules I cover. Francesco kindly agreed to be my supervisor for the dissertation topic I selected in my third year: *Analysing the Influence of Advertising on Male Cultural Norms: A Comparative Study of Fertility Rates in the UK and South Korea from 2005 to Present Day*. I was hopeful that from this workshop I would understand more about how this field is already being explored, especially the former question; how is advertising and media consumption shaped *by,* and how *does it shape* cultural norms? I can confidently say that the workshop was hugely valuable in both providing me with a plethora of avenues down which my research could travel and genuinely enthusing me for my upcoming dissertation.

Grace White, Human Sciences Student

We began the day by listening to Francesco Rampazzo speak about his work in progress. He presented on behalf of Ross Barker, PhD student from LSE, about the disaggregation of dating-app data, and behaviour/usage patterns. Then, we heard from Micol Morellini, DPhil from the Dept of Sociology, fascinatingly explaining how consumer data can be used for understanding migrant fertility behaviour, with a focus on the Italian "brain drain". Following this, Morten Thomson, DPhil from the Dept of Sociology, gave a focused lecture on transgender lives and the disparities in data, highlighting findings from collaborating with Getty Images, something which I am eager to apply to my own research. Subsequent lectures came from Andreas Edel who is the Executive Secretary of Population Europe and Flavio Nappi who is the CEO of 'MammaPack®' – a business aimed at providing Italian international migrants with an authentic flavour of home. We also heard speak: Dilan Başak from 'Cosmic Latte', the business behind LGBTQ+ apps "Zoe" (LBTQ+) and "Surge" (GBTQ+) and Suzy Warnock representing 'Nielson BookData', investigating consumer behaviour and the demographics behind book sales, library borrowings and audiobook sales from retailers – what are people reading, *and why*?

Dr Rebecca Swift, Senior Vice President - Creative, Getty Images


Workshop speakers at St John's College (from left: Suzy Warnock, Dilan Başak, Dr Francesco Rampazzo, Dr Rebecca Swift, Flavio Nappi, and Sara Denby)

Two lectures which were most relevant and exciting to me in terms of my research were those given by Sara Denby and Dr Rebecca Swift, representing the Unstereotype Alliance of UN Women, and Getty Images, respectively. Denby discussed the ways in which advertising should be centred as a force for good – highlighting inequalities within advertising, the inauthenticity in some advertising representation, and how social norms are shifted within, and by, the consumption of advertising media. The most enticing part, for me, of Denby's presentation was the discussion around 'leaving' men and boys 'behind'. Denby discussed how there has not been such a huge change in male representations over the last 75 years as has been seen for women, and that this may be reflected in advertising. Social policy was intertwined into this discussion in elucidating how laws surrounding e.g. LGBTQ+ individuals would impact the media consumed by differing nations, contributing to social norms, and what the public understand to be so. I feel I could really dive into this element of research in furthering my own dissertation. Dr Swift followed, fascinatingly portraying how data gathered by Getty Images can impact the representation of various demographics, and also how the rising threat of artificial intelligence has already infiltrated the world of media consumption. The measures taken to control AI generated imagery were discussed as Swift exacerbated how no imagery on the *editorial* side of the business were allowed to be retouched, a refreshing reminder in these rapidly developing times. Swift discussed how trends in social norms and social qualms can be pinpointed through this data research by commenting on the trends shown by Olympic photography over the last few decades, elucidating it as a mirror on the contemporary passions of society.

Not only was this experience a hugely valuable one in furthering the possibilities I can explore in my upcoming studies, I am genuinely interested in the overlap between academia, data and business, in

considerations for my own career in the future. I would like to thank Francesco for inviting me to such a brilliant opportunity, and those who I spoke to throughout the day who welcomed my questions and encouraged my interests.

The surprising benefits of exercising with friends

Dr Arran Davis explores the physical and social benefits of exercising with others in a new BBC Ideas film.

Did you know that exercising with friends comes with its own unexpected benefits?

Dr Arran Davis, Postdoctoral Researcher within the Social Body Lab (Centre for the Study of Social Cohesion) explores the physical and social benefits of exercising with others in a new BBC Ideas film made in partnership with BBC Ideas and Oxford University's Social Sciences Division.

The research behind the video

Dr Arran Davis answers some key questions and delves deeper into his research carried out in collaboration with Professor Emma Cohen.

Why does exercising with friends benefit our workouts?

Our evolutionary perspective views humans as a highly social species – we rely on other people for the material and cultural resources we need to both survive and thrive. And this would have been especially true for our ancestors. So, we expect that humans evolved to (tacitly) associate supportive social environments with relative resource abundance.

And this has important consequences for how our bodies manage their resources. During exercise, fatigue functions to keep us safe by making us stop before we get hurt or become dangerously exhausted. Interestingly, research suggests that fatigue is ultimately determined not by our muscles but by how we feel; our mind forces us to stop even when our muscles have something left to give. But this cautious system becomes a bit less careful when our social environments signal to us that we are safe and have the care and resources needed to recover. So, when we are with our friends, we start feeling fatigued a bit later, and this can both improve our workouts and make them more enjoyable.

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How can moving together make us feel closer and more connected?

There are probably two related but distinct routes through which this happens. At the neurobiological level, we release endorphins and endocannabinoids during exercise; these chemical messengers make us feel happy and content, and they are responsible for the 'runner's high'. Research has shown that sharing these feelings with others can help us feel closer and more connected. But on top of this, moving together, say in a team sport or dance, also involves collaboration, coordination, and cooperation. Doing these collaborative activities can lead us to trust each other more and to view each other as cooperative partners. In short, they help us build friendships. I'd argue that group exercise is special because it provides us with both neurobiological and cognitive paths to social bonding.

Are social relationships really that important for our health?

They really are! Many longitudinal studies have tried to understand the lifestyle factors underpinning long-term health. These studies follow large samples of people for years or even decades. Researchers ask participants about their daily habits – questions about their diet, how much they smoke, exercise, and see their friends, about their occupation and income, etc. They then also monitor how often participants get sick and record when they die.

These studies consistently show that being socially connected is one of the strongest predictors of good mental and physical health. One meta-analysis (a technique for summarizing the results of a bunch of other studies) even found that lacking positive social connections is as dangerous for our health as smoking up to 15 cigarettes a day! This BBC Radio 4 More or Less episode has a great summary of how this research was conducted.

Why do social relationships affect our health?

In humans, like other social animals, isolation signals relative danger and resource scarcity. So, we respond to social isolation in a way that protects us from these risks; we get more stressed and activate the fight or flight response, we become more sensitive to pain and fatigue, and we can even feel depressed. These short-term responses may have helped our ancestors survive social isolation by allowing them to deal better with physical threats and resource scarcity. But when chronically activated in our modern world (think about chronic stress), they slowly degrade the physiological systems needed for long-term health, causing us to get sick more often and to die sooner.

What kind of research do you do to understand how social environments affect our workouts?

We do a mixture of experimental and observational research. Our experiments test the hypothesis that social support reduces fatigue and enhances performance during exercise. These experiments are a bit tricky to conduct; we can't just have people exercise with friends in one condition and on their own in another, because that would lead to confounds. For example, people might just try harder in the social condition to 'show off' to their friends. So, we manipulate the social environment surrounding participants, but they exercise alone in all experimental conditions to avoid these social confounds. We've had participants come to experimental sessions either alone or with a friend (who warms up with them and then waits for them in another room), or we simply show participants either the photo of someone they feel supported by or the photo of a stranger. Our results show that even just viewing the photo of a supportive friend can make exercise feel less tiring and allow us to produce greater outputs.

An example of our observational research is our study on parkrun, a free, weekly, community-based 5 km run for all ages and skill levels that happens at over 2,000 locations worldwide. We followed over 100 parkrunners for an 18-week period; each week, participants answered questions about how they felt during their runs, and about their social interactions with other parkrunners. We found that parkrunners who attended with family and friends and who felt supported by the parkrun community enjoyed their runs more and felt more energised, and that these feelings of increased energy led them to run faster 5 km times. Through a mix of experimental and observational research, we can better understand the causal mechanisms underpinning real-world behaviours and outcomes.

Where did the ideas for this research come from?

These ideas are not new; many of us have friends from sports teams or exercise and dance classes, and the links between team cohesion, perceptions of support, and sporting success have long been assumed by amateur and professional athletes alike. But we've also looked at these phenomena in

the sports teams we've been a part of. Much of this research was done by myself and Jacob Taylor when we were DPhil (PhD) students in Oxford. Jacob and I were both student athletes; I was a javelin thrower on the Oxford University Blues Athletics team, and Jacob was captain of the Oxford University Blues Rugby Team. We used our experiences training with these teams to inform the questions we asked and to shape the studies we designed.

Graduate News

1973

Lynne Jones (Lady Margaret Hall)'s new book *Sorry for the Inconvenience but this is an Emergency*. *The Nonviolent Struggle for our Planet's Future was* published by Hirst in spring 2024. In this she provides an account of the new era of mass protest, calling for action against existential threats. Lynne is a doctor and aid worker and shares her 1980s experiences opposing nuclear weapons at Greenham Common, and her journey in movements like Extinction Rebellion today. She reflects on public history and her personal story to unpack nonviolent protest in a world on the brink addressing questions about what we can learn from past movements, how to communicate with those who disagree, what kind of disruption is most effective in Western democracies, whether property damage is nonviolent, whether the law is just, the importance of direct interventions, boycotts and non-co-operation and what indigenous campaigners of the Global South can teach us.

2013

Iman Effendi (St Hugh's) started a career in management consulting at BCG. After graduating. She then left BCG but continued in the consulting/investment research space and specialised in sustainability and net-zero transition. She spent 3 years at climate/ESG-focused non-profits (CDP and FAIRR). In her last role at Systemiq, her clients were investors, corporates, and Global South delegations to COP. Iman also did an MSc in Development Studies at LSE 3 years after finishing at Oxford. She took a sabbatical last year for health reasons and is now pursuing a career change to become a psychotherapist.

2015

Freya Pryce is now working as a Government Social Researcher for the Welsh Government. A profession that felt like a perfectly fitting trajectory from her Human Sciences background from her very first day in post. Life as a Government Social Researcher is a fascinating interplay between policy and research. A part of the role is briefing ministers and policy makers on the latest research findings. Vice versa Freya listens to policy priorities and evidence gaps and looks at how new research can fill knowledge gaps. The focus of her current role is children and young people's health and well-being. She is the Welsh Government Senior Research Officer for the School Health Research Network (SHRN). Freya works closely with the SHRN team at Cardiff University, Public Health Wales and Welsh Government colleagues to enhance the positive impact of research, policy, and practice on children and young people's health and well-being.

2019

Elie Danziger (St Hugh's) completed in December 2024 his PhD in Social Anthropology at the School of Advanced Studies in Social Sciences (EHESS) in Paris, France. Entitled *(Un)bounded Ecologies: Making Biospheric Knowledge through the Pragmatics of Sustenance*, his project was in the anthropology of biosciences, studying ethnographically the ways ecologists use — or rather tinker

with — (highly) controlled experimentation to produce knowledge of ecosystems. Having completed this project with deep appreciation for the teaching and community in Human Sciences for inspiration, Elie is now eager to connect with any alum working in applied anthropology (ethnographic consulting) with an interest in joining the field, ideally to develop it in France or work remotely from there. Feel free to contact at: e.danziger@icloud.com

2021

Yasmin Nguyen (Mansfield) graduated from Peking University in the summer of 2024 with a thesis exploring how people in Shanghai use embodied practices to process and integrate trauma. Since then, she has trained as a trauma-sensitive breathwork facilitator and offered 1-1 breathwork sessions at Kamalaya Koh Samui, one of the world's leading integrative wellness centres. She recently relocated to London to launch her own practice: *Wavekind*. Breathwork was central to Yasmin's own journey, from being a primarily cerebral person to a fully embodied human, alchemising mind and body (which is central to healing and recovery). Hence, Wavekind draws on techniques from breathwork, somatic therapy, and nervous system regulation to support people navigating life transitions, integrating intense experiences, or simply seeking greater clarity and connection. Please reach out at yasmin@wavekind.com if you are interested to learn more, collaborate, or have any questions.

2024 Publications by Institute Members

Institute members names are in bold.

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