

Academic Associate Project Areas 2026  
Department of Psychology, York St John University

**Title:** Exploring the psychological basis of virtual reality analgesia

**Supervisors:** Dr Matt Coxon, Dr Callum Glenhall, Dr Nicola Cutting

### **Project summary**

Whilst opioids are traditionally used for the management of pain, well documented side effects have motivated researchers to identify safer alternatives. One alternative is the use of virtual reality headsets to display a 'distracting' virtual experience to lower perceived pain intensity and heighten pain thresholds, particularly for acute pain. However, the psychological basis of this 'VR analgesia' is still underdeveloped and underexplored. Whilst effects on acute pain are commonly attributed to the loading of attentional resources, the extent to which this is unique to this medium, and how this interacts with individual differences in the VR experience, require further exploration to optimise its use. This PhD project will explore the psychological basis of VR analgesia with undergraduate participants, using cold-pressor tasks and experimental methods. The main aim will be to determine which aspects of VR analgesia, if any, could provide beneficial effects that are unique to the medium.

Academic Associate Project Areas 2026  
Department of Psychology, York St John University

**Title:** Exploring the social connectedness and social identities of adults with learning disabilities in Yorkshire

**Supervisors:** Dr Sophie Westrop, Dr Ruth Knight, Prof Lorna Hamilton

### **Project summary**

Adults with learning disabilities often rely on social support from family members and / or paid support staff, which can influence their access to social connections. Research indicates that many adults with a learning disability experience loneliness, which has been exacerbated by the closing of wider support services since the Covid-19 pandemic. Intersecting marginalised identities may further exacerbate these inequities. For example, access to financial resources can result in greater access to social support, while gender identity may contribute to perceptions of safety. However, learning disabilities research has been criticised for not considering the effect of, for example, racial or ethnic identities, gender, or other experiences of marginalisation. These gaps highlight the need for studies that respect the individual and intersecting identities and experiences of people with a learning disability. This project will take an affirming, collaborative approach to the topic, adopting relevant quantitative and/or qualitative methods.

Academic Associate Project Areas 2026  
Department of Psychology, York St John University

**Title:** When are two heads better than one? The development of children's collaborative problem-solving skills.

**Supervisors:** Dr Shona Duguid, Dr Nicola Cutting

### **Project summary**

Tackling a challenge together enables us to combine knowledge and experience, as well as the opportunity to divide the task between many hands (and minds). Young children start showing signs of working with peers to solve problems as toddlers. As their social cognition and communication develops, so does their ability to collaborate by building a shared representation of the task. This evidence is mainly from relatively simple well-structured tasks, where the challenge is social coordination. Much less is known about how children approach more complex, open-ended tasks where they may need to innovate a new solution together. This project will investigate the development of collaborative problem-solving in 3- to 8-year-old children, seeking to answer the question: when are two heads really better than one? We also aim to explore the evolutionary roots of collaborative problem-solving by investigating how nonhuman primates represent their partner's role in a task (pending additional funding).

Academic Associate Project Areas 2026  
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**Title:** Trauma-Informed Care in Homelessness Service Contexts

**Supervisors:** Dr Branagh O'Shaughnessy and Prof Divine Charura

### **Project summary**

Many individuals engaged with homelessness services have experienced traumatic events in their lives and compared to the general population, post-traumatic stress disorder is much more prevalent among people experiencing homelessness.

Trauma-informed care is a framework of practice that recognises the traumas that individuals may have experienced and aims to promote a sense of safety and empowerment among trauma-experienced people. However, the homelessness service sector is pressured by a combination of limited/insecure funding and the demand placed on them due to rising rates of homelessness. External constraints may have an impact on how trauma-informed principles are employed in homelessness services. Using different interview methods and drawing from administrative data, this PhD project will investigate how trauma-informed service provision is delivered from the perspective of both service users, service providers and the broader service context. Findings will highlight key service gaps and opportunities for the development of trauma-informed care in homelessness services.

Academic Associate Project Areas 2026  
Department of Psychology, York St John University

**Title:** Neurodivergent communication and psychological flow in education settings

**Supervisors:** Dr Brett Heasman, Dr Morag Galloway

### **Project summary**

Many neurodivergent students (e.g., ADHD, autism, dyslexia) can struggle with focus and motivation at school, often because divergences around sensory sensitivities, attentional patterns, and specific interests are not well supported or understood by the curriculum. This can impact communication with others and one's own ability to manage flow states, moments of heightened concentration linked to motivation, wellbeing and achievement. This PhD project will explore the potential for neurodivergent flourishing in education, drawing on concepts related to *neurodivergent intersubjectivity* and *autistic flow theory*. It will take a participatory and interdisciplinary approach, working with an education provider and considering a range of communicative modalities (e.g., spoken dialogue, embodied/non-verbal action, sensory and material practices) across school life. Methods may include interviews/focus groups, surveys, and video ethnography, alongside more creative forms of data collection. Findings will aim to contribute to the development of policy and practice in supporting neurodivergent education.