

King's Student Perspectives

Psychological and Behavioural Sciences (PBS)

Lucy, 1st year

How did your interest in Psychology start?

I have been interested in people and how they think and behave since I was a small child. I had always seen it as an innate interest, and it wasn't until I was in sixth form that I began to consider studying social sciences at university. I had never studied Psychology or any similar discipline as an academic subject before, but I realised that a lot of what I was reading, the things I chose to watch on television, and lectures, museums and events I went to had this common theme.



Lucy

I decided to focus on Psychology and continued to read about the discipline, but at the same time I was daunted by the idea of doing a whole degree in a subject that I had never studied formally before. This was when I found the Psychological and Behavioural Sciences (PBS) course at Cambridge. I liked

how PBS offers a range of subjects to be studied alongside Psychology, giving a broad and diverse course which I felt matched my range of interests.

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When it came to finalising my choices, no other university course seemed to match the variation within Cambridge PBS. I knew that I wanted to keep my interests open, and Cambridge seemed like a wonderful place to study too. I applied at the end of 2012, when the PBS course was first being established at Cambridge – they had been teaching

Psychology for a long time but had previously been offering it as part of other courses. I went to an open day, attended sample lectures and got lots of information, and I got to meet other potential students, as well as talking to some of the academics who had set up the course. In my year, it was sometimes difficult to find information because it was so new and parts of it were yet to be confirmed, but the course website was helpful and it was updated as more information was released.

What subjects did you study for A level?

I did my A levels at a large sixth form college in Leyland, which is just south of Preston in Lancashire. I studied Maths, Chemistry, Biology, Drama and Theatre Studies, and General Studies, as well as taking English Language and Literature to AS level.

The statistics part of A level Maths and parts of A2 Biology have been useful, though not all PBS students have studied these subjects before. As I mainly took sciences A levels, my A level in Drama and Theatre



Results day jumping with other students who got places at Oxbridge! I am in the middle here.

Three of my four papers now are entirely essay-based.

Studies has been surprisingly useful for how it improved my essay writing skills, as three of my four papers now are entirely essay-based.

I was a bit worried when I applied, as I had

not studied Psychology before, but this turned out to be entirely unfounded. Many of the students here haven't studied Psychology before, and the course is both focused away from the areas covered in A level Psychology, and taught and assessed in a completely different way. There is no particular subject that you have to have studied at school before the PBS course. You learn so much that few people have studied before so quickly that everybody will be studying new material anyway. I would say, though, that having some essay writing skills is advisable.

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Another thing I want to mention is that lots of people at King's went to state schools and sixth form colleges like me. Equally, some didn't. And some come from huge colleges or large cities, whilst others are from quite small places. It really doesn't matter. Students really are admitted on their academic potential, and once you're through the gate everybody is in the same boat.



Getting to know one another in King's bar

What were the first few days at King's like?

My first few days at King's were a whirlwind of meeting students and academics, signing up for things, unpacking and trying to attend as many of the freshers' activities as possible! There wasn't time to be nervous, and I met everybody within the first few days, which made it really easy to settle in. I remember just wanting to start lectures and work properly, but looking back, the first few days were really important for making sure that I settled in properly.

The range of events that were offered was really varied. There was a reading group discussion on a book that we were all sent during the holidays, which I was initially nervous about, but it ended up actually being really relaxed and just helped to get everyone talking. Most of the other activities were focused away from work and academia, such as going punting (boats on the river) and having port and cheese with the College Chaplain, which really made me to feel like a true Cambridge student!

King's, and in fact Cambridge in general, was surprisingly easy to find my way around. We were provided with plenty of maps, and after the first couple of days we knew where everything we needed was. Most places I needed to know the way to for lectures or supervisions were the same each time, and weren't very far away. Once I'd been a couple of times, there was no problem finding them again.

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The only advice I would give to freshers would be to come to King's prepared to have a go at anything! The first few days are mad and unpredictable, but you will really enjoy it if you try to participate as much as possible. Get to know people straight away and find other people doing your subject, as

you will probably get to know them very well over the next few years!

What has the course been like so far?

Studying PBS at Cambridge has been a wonderful experience so far, but I have to say that it is nothing like studying for A levels! Aside from the subject content being very different, the learning experience itself is a world away from what I experienced in sixth form. For the first time, I have been offered the chance to express novel personal opinions and to talk directly to academics in the field. There is no longer a rigid syllabus, and no finite amount of information that needs to be memorized and recalled in the exams.



With my family on King's bridge

I was advised by my supervisor that I should 'take care of the learning and the exams will take care of themselves', and I think that this advice is representative of the way learning is approached here at Cambridge. There is very much an attitude of 'learn what interests you, read about what interests you': you aren't confined by such a rigid structure as for A levels. Instead, you have the freedom to choose how and what you learn.

As exciting and liberating as this Cambridge approach is, I did find it daunting at the beginning. Going from a place where you are told what to do and how to do it to a setting where you are encouraged to go out and find things out for yourself is a huge challenge. At first, I felt like I didn't know which areas particularly interested me, which books I wanted to read or whether I had any opinions or not! However, what I learnt is that everybody feels the same, but more importantly that you aren't even expected to feel any differently in first year. There isn't really time to be nervous about it; only to have a go, to do your best and to work through it.

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Eventually, you realize that you have been improving, though you might not have felt it at the time. Two terms into the course, I'm not sure that it exactly gets easier, but I have certainly become more accustomed and less bewildered by the range of obscure essay titles that get thrown at me. I have become more comfortable with the idea that there are no conclusive answers, and I have begun to understand how I work through and resolve problems most effectively.

The course is everything that I expected it to be and more. What I really wanted was the variety of areas of study and the ability to integrate information between the papers. This has certainly lived up to my expectations: Psychological and Behavioural Sciences is extremely flexible and I've had the chance to study a range of things that interest me. I don't think that I could have asked for anything more.

What do you study in terms of content?

We take four papers (courses) in the first year of PBS: two are compulsory, and two are options chosen out of a list of six.

The first compulsory paper is PBS1 – Introduction to Psychology. It covers several topics within the field from a range of perspectives from cognitive to developmental and biological psychology.

The second compulsory paper is called PBS2 – Psychological Enquiry and Methods. This paper teaches lots of skills which are useful as a foundation for studying many of the social and natural science disciplines. The paper includes some basic statistics and research methods, as well as some neurobiology which specifically helps the psychology aspect of the course.

Having a science A level background, I was keen to continue to study science at a higher level.

In terms of optional papers, I chose to take the Biological Anthropology paper, which is called Humans in Biological Perspective, and a paper from the Cambridge Natural Sciences course called Evolution and Behaviour. These choices have ended up complementing each other really well, and having a

science A level background, I was keen to continue to study science at a higher level, alongside the two Psychology papers.

I took Evolution and Behaviour because of my interest in Biology, as well as the links in the course to Psychology. As a Natural Sciences paper, I hoped that it would provide me with a good science background for my other papers, which it has certainly proven to do so far.

I was encouraged to take the Biological Anthropology option by my Director of Studies. I thought that the course outline seemed very interesting, but I didn't know much about Anthropology as a discipline and was reluctant to commit to

the choice

initially. As it turns out, Biological Anthropology involves lots of areas of study that I am really interested in, including human origins and primate-human cognition and communication.

As the courses have developed, there has been some overlap between my two optional papers, with Evolution and Behaviour giving a solid underpinning of genetic theories which have really helped me to understand some of the concepts in Biological Anthropology.

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What are supervisions like?

Supervisions are probably one of the biggest differences between studying for A levels and studying at Cambridge. In a supervision, you meet for an hour with an academic in your subject, either one-to-one or in small groups with other students who also study that subject. For most arts or social science subjects, these supervisions occur fortnightly but they are usually once a week for maths and science subjects.

All supervisions are different. For Psychology and Biological Anthropology, the supervisions usually consist of discussing an essay which you have written in preparation, or sometimes talking through the theories from a certain part of the course that you have read about or heard discussed in lectures. The idea is that you broaden your knowledge in that field.

In Evolution and Behaviour from the Natural Sciences tripos (tripos is what students here call courses), the supervisions are usually more closely linked to the lecture content, asking questions and breaking down theories to ensure that you get a comprehensive knowledge of each part of the course.

I found the first few supervisions daunting. Meeting an expert in the subject when you are only just starting out can be really nerve-racking! However, you soon realize that all they expect is for you to work hard and show an interest in the supervisions, not to meet their level of knowledge! The times when I get the most out of supervisions are when I have read over my notes and around the subject as well, and when I ask questions! It has become clear to me that even if you don't know the answers, you can still ask good questions and raise



King's (the Gibbs Building) in the snow

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important points. Often, especially with some of the social science subjects, nobody knows the answers and the most interesting discussions often come from the very uncertainty of ideas or theories. Going to your supervisions prepared with ideas, or even a list of questions or problems you have had, can be really useful, and it's important not to be scared to speak up as well.

I'd say that how you deal with your interview gives a bit of an indication of whether you can see yourself enjoying the supervisions here and finding them useful. Of course, the interview will be much more worrying because of what relies on it, but if you can manage to see past this and end up enjoying the discussion and one-to-one contact, then the supervision set up at

Cambridge is likely to work for you. I think that's probably one thing that they look for in interviews.

What other teaching do you have?

For the essay options, most of the teaching is done by supervisions and lectures. For PBS2, (Psychological Methods and Inquiry), there are also example classes to support the statistics lectures and to make sure that we can work through the problems. There are also practical classes for some of the neurobiology material and for the research, where we get to work in groups and practice applying information from the lectures. Evolution and Behaviour also has a practical component, as do all the Natural Sciences papers. These practicals are different to the Psychology practicals though, as some of them are assessed directly, rather than just reinforcing other knowledge.



Outside King's

The lectures are generally very useful and are the main structure behind the papers. For Evolution and Behaviour, again, as with most if not all Natural Sciences papers, the course relies very heavily on the lecture content. There are three lectures a week (including a Saturday morning lecture!), and the majority of information that you are expected to know comes from these lectures.

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For PBS1 (Introduction to Psychology) and Biological Anthropology (Humans in Biological Perspective), there are two lectures a week, as with most of the social science

subjects. Here the lectures act more as a starting point so that you can then read around the topics and write your essays from a combination of lecture material and

personal reading.

For PBS2 (Psychological Methods and Inquiry), there are generally two statistics lectures a week, with fortnightly classes for the neurobiology and research methods.

There are practical classes for some of the neurobiology material and for the research.

Because my course is made up from some social science papers as well as the Natural Sciences paper (Evolution and Behaviour), my timetable seems quite unusual compared to students studying other subjects in which the papers all come from one department. One week I would have nine hours of lectures, three hours of supervisions and lots of independent study to do, but then the next week I would have nine hours of lectures, one hour of supervision but eight hours of practical class and less independent study time. As the weeks went by, I ended up getting into this alternating pattern, but the supervisions are flexible enough to change them if needed.



Psychology Society Launch Party



Getting ready for a night out (I'm on the left)

How do you find the workload?

The workload is tough - I don't think that many people would dispute that. To some extent, however, the workload is what you make it. As long as you meet the deadlines, there is some degree of choice about how much reading you do etc. Nobody controls

whether you read one book or twenty before you write your essay, though I'm sure that the quality of your work would reflect this to some extent. Personally, I've found it important to get as much work done as possible during the day so that I can go out and socialize in the evenings. The social aspect of life is so central here, and it's important not to miss out on things that are going on, but sometimes choices do have to be made between work and play. If I'm struggling with an essay or a piece of work, ultimately I

think that it is better to just hit the deadline and get help

and feedback on what you have achieved in supervisions rather than getting behind with the deadlines, which can then build up and impact on later parts of the course.

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I don't really think there are any secrets to time management. I would advise everyone to get a diary, write

everything in it including lectures, supervisions and social events, so that you can fit the work you have to do around it all. Also, splitting work into manageable chunks sounds like such an obvious thing to do, but I often have to remind myself that a task such as writing an essay can seem much



Out at Lola Lo's with Lauren and Liam

less daunting when it is split into reading various chapters, making notes or mindmaps and writing certain sections.

It's also really important to remember that you can't do everything.

sure you prioritize relaxing activities every now and then; it's important to give your body and brain a break.

What do you enjoy doing when you're not working?

There will always be people who seem to be at every social event, at the same time as being on the rowing

It's also really important to remember that you can't do everything: sleeping, eating and exercise - even if it's just a walk along the backs (by the river) - need to fit into your life too. Cambridge terms are so short that it's tempting to try to manically attempt to go to every event and read every book on the reading list at the same time. It isn't feasible to do this, and it can make you ill. Make



King's gym – The Vault

team, in a band and meeting all

their deadlines. This doesn't seem realistic with the amount of work though, I know that I have a lot less free time than some of my friends at other universities. I do enjoy spending time in the gym, and trying out events such as 'wine tasting' or 'chocolate tasting'. There's such a range of activities on offer, it's hard to know what to choose.



*With Lauren and Isabel at Formal Hall
(I am on the right)*

Formal dinners are held most Wednesdays at King's, and are one of the best parts of my week. There is a very friendly atmosphere and everybody dresses up, though we don't have to wear gowns as you do at most other colleges. The food is excellent, and bottles of wine can be taken in. These formal dinners are enjoyed by many of the students here, to the extent that tickets often sell out within two or three minutes! After the formals everyone congregates in the bar, where there is usually entertainment, before heading out to one of

the local clubs, which is a really good break from working.

Do you see the other PBS students much?

There are four PBS students in my year at King's (no College has many PBS students – we actually have a comparatively large number!) and we so are quite close. We also share supervisions with the two PBS students from

The other PBS students provide a strong support network and are probably my first port of call when I want to ask a quick question.



With Zsofi and Bavi (PBS at Clare) at a Clare College Formal

Clare college next door, and the six of us often help each other out as well as meeting for lunch or a coffee or going to formals at our respective colleges. The other PBS students provide a strong support network and are probably my first port of call when I want to ask a quick question, or get some help.

Having friends who study other subjects is also really important for both widening your friendship circle and getting away from the work in your subject. The same can be said for having friends from other colleges as well. Although it is crucial to have the support of King's students, it's important not to be limited at the same time.

What are the best and worst things about PBS?

One of the best things about studying PBS for me has been the variation within the course, and the opportunity to study other subjects alongside Psychology. This also means you get to meet people with a range of interests, which is really exciting and refreshing.

The worst thing is that some aspects of the course have not run as smoothly as hoped with it being the first year Cambridge has taught Psychology in the form of the PBS course, but having said this, it has been a great opportunity to be part of the first cohort of PBS students and help the course organizers work through problems to make the course even better for future students.



Priya, Zsofi, Nora and I - King's first year of PBS!

What advice would you give to a sixth former thinking of applying for PBS?

I'd advise anyone who is considering PBS to make sure that they have read through the paper descriptions on the website and that they have other interests outside of Psychology that they wish to study, for example Sociology or Anthropology. One thing that distinguishes PBS at Cambridge from studying Psychology at other universities is that quite a bit of the course is made up of disciplines other than Psychology, especially in the first year. This really suited me, because I had a range of interests within the sciences and social sciences, but I do think that it is something important to consider before applying as it may not suit everyone.

When I was applying for PBS I wanted to do some introductory reading to prepare me for the course. I found some long reading lists for each of the papers, but these seemed quite daunting and were more in line with the reading lists given for each topic to help with essays, rather than gentle introductory reading. Now that I am on the course, I can see why this was the case:

Quite a bit of the course is made up of disciplines other than Psychology, especially in the first year.

there isn't one book that covers most of any of the papers because they are so varied. Here are my suggestions: for Psychology I'd recommend reading something like 'Thinking Fast and Slow' by Daniel Kahneman, although not directly related to the course material, this book gets you thinking and broadening your ideas on a range of topics. Books such as 'The Personality Puzzle' are more directly related to the course, but are less of an easy read. Books such as 'The Selfish Gene' or 'Endless Forms Most Beautiful' are good background reading for the Evolution and Behaviour paper, and also for Biological Anthropology to some extent. Other good introductory reading for Biological Anthropology would be books like 'Nature Via Nurture' by Matt Ridley or 'The Origin of Our Species' by Chris Stringer, which cover a couple of topics on the first year course.



With Bethan and Lauren on the riverbank in College

What was the application process like?

I sent in three pieces of written work, each slightly different.

The application process was relatively straightforward. I sent in my UCAS application, as with all the other universities that I applied to. I also had to complete the SAQ (another application form) for Cambridge, which I used to elaborate on my interests in the other disciplines, which were well matched to the Cambridge PBS course specifically. I sent in three pieces of written work, each slightly different as I wasn't entirely sure what they were looking for. One piece was a literature essay from my

English AS course, another a scientific essay from my Crest Award and the third one was a theatre studies essay from A2. I was expecting to talk about the scientific essay in my interview if any, but I was quite surprised when I was asked to discuss the theatre essay. I enjoyed writing the essay and was open to the questions they asked, even though I didn't always know the answers!

Coming to Cambridge for my interview was scary, especially as I'd had a relatively poor mock interview experience. I was interviewed by two academics, one who is

now my Director of Studies and my supervisor,

and another who is also one of my supervisors. I was incredibly nervous before the interview, but the interview itself was not a scary experience. It was very laid back, and we didn't just talk about Psychology. It really felt like they wanted to get to know me and get a sense of who I was and what I was about. The interview confirmed for me that they were not just looking for students who had studied

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They really were just looking for people with enthusiasm, potential and an open mind towards questions they were asked.

Psychology before, or even knew a lot about Psychology, they really were just looking for people with enthusiasm, potential and an open mind towards questions they were asked.

What about College choice?

I chose King's for a number of reasons, and unashamedly because it is a beautiful place. I had also been on an open day to King's and so it was the College that I felt most familiar with, having met some of the academics. PBS at King's had a number of entry requirements, more than some of the other Colleges, and I wanted to complete these in order to push myself into submitting a really good application. I also felt that this might be an advantage for other Colleges if I got pooled, but I don't think that would have been the case and luckily I never found out.



With Olivier, my "College husband" at Valentines' Formal. Each new student has College parents in the year above.



Reece, Lauren, Theo, Bethan and I

I know lots of people who had no particular reasons for choosing their College and are just as happy as I am. I would, however, consider looking carefully at the different Colleges, as no two are the same. The different sizes, locations and even political orientations can really affect the atmosphere of the Colleges so I'd recommend looking at the websites and visiting if possible.

The College system provides a really supportive network of students, academics and resources. It plays a big part in creating your Cambridge identity throughout your time here, and helps you to get to know people really well both within your course and from other courses. These are the people you are

going to be living with, studying with and socializing with for the next few years, so it's really important to choose somewhere that you feel comfortable.

What about accommodation?

The first years at King's currently live in one of two places; the Keynes Building or in Spalding hostel. I live on the third floor of Keynes this year, and although it does not have the beautiful architecture of some of the other parts of King's, it really is excellent accommodation. There are ensembles with all of the rooms in Keynes and access to small kitchens on all the floors. One of the best things about the accommodation in Keynes is that all the first three floors are filled with freshers and all the rooms are really close so you get to know everyone very well that way. Keynes is also attached to the part of King's with the bar and the dining hall and café, so you don't even need to go outside to get to any of those places, which is a real bonus.

All the first three floors are filled with freshers and all the rooms are really close so you get to know everyone very well that way.

A fourth floor room in Keynes with two levels



*Above: looking down from the upper part;
Below: the upper room at the top of the stairs,
(it is above the ensuite bathroom)*



We have just reached the part of the year where we choose next year's accommodation, which is scary because it seems like we've only just got here! I have a room just above where I have lived this year, but most people are going to be living outside the Keynes building. The accommodation for second years is all relatively close, either within the walls of King's itself, across the road, or just over the river. There were some really great rooms available for second years, most with ensembles, and some with kitchens really close or attractive architectural features.

The room allocation system works with a ballot, with students who are high up in second year being lower down in third year and vice versa. Sadly, I was very low in the ballot this year, meaning that my choice of room was limited but I have ended up being really pleased with the room I got. The fourth floor Keynes rooms have a mezzanine level, with the beds underneath a sloping apex room which will be really exciting! They have a nice view over Chetwynd court as well and, of course, are just as close to the facilities as my room this year.

April 2014

A note to current King's Psychological and Behavioural Sciences students

If you would like to write about your experiences of studying PBS at King's for our prospective students to read, please email Kristy in the Admissions Office for further details:
undergraduate.admissions@kings.cam.ac.uk