

I would like to extend my deepest gratitude to the awards team at Royal Holloway for granting me the Victoria Hazlitt Memorial Fund. This sum was essential in supporting me to be able to complete the first study of my PhD, which will help us to understand how adolescents explore in new environments and whether risk seeking is beneficial at this point in the lifespan.

Being awarded the sum from the Victoria Hazlitt Memorial Fund allowed me to recruit 140 adult and adolescent participants for the first study of my PhD. Specifically, this examined how teenagers and adults explore new environments in scenarios similar to those we would have encountered as hunter-gatherers. This task, known as a 'patch foraging paradigm', examines how effective decision makers are at maximising resources in an environment by choosing whether to exploit a gradually depleting resource, or explore to find a new one with a fresh distribution of resources. The data collection took place at a school in Surrey and adults were recruited from across London. Several classes of 16-17 year olds and adults aged 21+ took part in the study in exchange for a small prize, which the Victoria Hazlitt Memorial Fund was directly responsible for funding. Importantly, participants were awarded a prize based on their performance; the more resources they collected in the task, the more they were awarded at the end of the study. This was crucial in ensuring their performance was optimal and therefore was able to test our research question. Data collection for the study was successfully completed in June 2019.

Since then, we have analysed the findings, which suggest adolescents were more optimal foragers than adults. Excitingly, this suggests that there are adaptive properties to risk seeking and exploration at this point in the lifespan. These findings contribute to a perspective of adolescence that consider the strengths of this developmental stage, rather than only the negative aspects of risk taking. This has the potential to inform interventions aimed at reducing negative outcomes at this time, such as substance misuse, injury and mortality, by 'working alongside' this predisposition for exploration and guide these individuals in a positive direction. We have been fortunate enough to present our findings at one international and one national conference, where the work was received well by attendees.

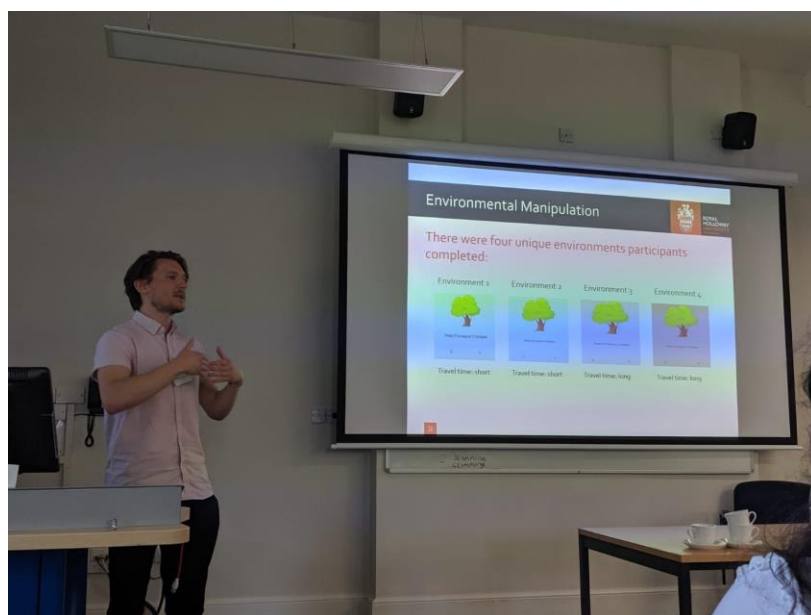


Figure 1: Sharing our findings at an international conference

Moving forward, we aim to write up our findings for publication in a peer reviewed journal and disseminate them to audiences including practitioners and policy makers. Furthermore, these findings have helped guide the second study of my PhD, which builds on this topic. We plan to examine whether social influence can help guide adolescents in both positive and negative directions, to help understand how peers can be a force for both good and bad.

This research would not have been possible without the financial aid of the Victoria Hazlitt Memorial Fund. I would like to again thank those involved in the process, and highly recommend the award to future applicants. The award has allowed me to have a strong start to my PhD which I will be carry forward into my second and third year.