

2027 Summer Research Project

Project title	What Do People Actually Do When They Talk to a Robot? Coding Video-Recorded Interactions with an AI
Positions available	One position.
Hours & delivery	20 hours per week for 6 weeks (11 January to 19 February 2027). On campus at St Lucia (School of Psychology), because the recordings are confidential research data that must be viewed on secure lab computers. Working days are flexible, typically three to four weekdays.
About the project (150-250 words)	When people interact with an artificial agent, what do they actually do? Do they smile, laugh, lean in, and make eye contact the way they would with a person, or do they treat the exchange as operating a machine? And does that depend on whether the agent has a body, or on what people believe is behind it? In 2026 our lab ran a study in which participants held a conversation with an AI, delivered either through a NAO humanoid robot or through an audio-only set-up, and were told either that they were talking to an AI or to a human. Every session was video recorded, and every conversation was transcribed. That footage is a rich record of real human behaviour toward artificial agents, and so far it has only been analysed through what participants told us in questionnaires afterwards. This project is about systematically coding what participants actually did, because observed behaviour is often a better guide than self-report to how socially people are really engaging. You will help develop a behavioural coding scheme for the recordings (smiling and laughter, gaze toward the agent, posture and gestures, turn-taking, and signs of engagement or disengagement), apply it reliably across sessions, and analyse whether behaviour differs by embodiment and by belief about the agent. If time allows, you will extend the coding to the transcripts, examining how much people disclose, how polite they are, and whether they use the social language they would use with a person.
What you'll do (100-150 words)	You will begin by reviewing a sample of recordings with the supervising research assistant, to draft a coding scheme grounded in the human-robot interaction and nonverbal behaviour literatures. You will then code the full set of sessions using behavioural coding software, establish inter-rater reliability on a subset double-coded with a second coder, and refine the scheme where agreement is poor. You will build a clean, documented dataset linking the coded behaviour to the study's conditions and questionnaire measures, and run initial analyses comparing behaviour across embodiment and belief conditions. If time allows, you will apply a parallel coding scheme to the conversation transcripts. Throughout you will keep a coding manual that future coders can follow.
What you'll learn (100-150 words)	You will learn the craft of behavioural observation research: how to turn raw video into reliable, analysable data, which is a skill valued across developmental, social, and clinical psychology. You will gain practical experience with behavioural coding software, with establishing and reporting inter-rater reliability, and with managing and analysing a multi-level dataset in R. You will read the literature on nonverbal behaviour and human-robot interaction and see how theories about social engagement with machines translate into concrete,

	observable indicators. You will also learn about the practical and ethical handling of sensitive recorded data. You will be embedded in an active lab, attending weekly meetings with PhD students and research assistants working on related questions about robots, AI, and social behaviour.
Project outcomes (75-125 words)	By the end of the placement, the lab will have a documented behavioural coding scheme with established reliability, a fully coded dataset of the recorded interactions linked to the study's experimental conditions and questionnaire measures, initial analyses of how behaviour varies with embodiment and belief about the agent, and a coding manual for future use. If the transcript coding is completed, a parallel linguistic dataset will be added. These outputs will feed directly into a publication from the 2026 study and into the design of the lab's 2027 honours team project, in which your contribution will be credited. You will present a short summary of your work at a lab meeting at the end of the placement.
Who should apply? (75-125 words)	This project suits a second- or third-year student in psychology or a related discipline who is a careful observer and enjoys close, patient work with data. No prior research experience is required. The key qualities are attention to detail, consistency, and the ability to stick to a coding rule even when a judgment is ambiguous. Some statistics coursework is helpful, and any experience with R or with observational or qualitative coding is an asset, though we can teach the specifics. Because the recordings are confidential, you must be comfortable working on campus and handling sensitive data responsibly. An interest in nonverbal behaviour, communication, or human-robot interaction will make the project especially rewarding.
Team & supervision	You will be supervised by Professor Eric Vanman in the School of Psychology. The lab studies the social neuroscience of emotion and human-robot interaction using behavioural, psychophysiological, and neuroimaging methods. Day to day, you will work with an experienced research assistant who is familiar with the original study and its recordings. You will be invited to the lab's weekly meetings, where you will join two other summer scholars building materials for the 2027 team project and PhD students working on related questions about robots, AI, and social behaviour.
Additional opportunities (optional)	Your contribution will be credited in the resulting publication, and a strong coding scheme may itself support a methods-focused write-up. The placement is a natural pathway into the lab's 2027 honours team project and into future research volunteering or RA work.
Additional requirements (if applicable)	You will complete a confidentiality and data-handling induction in the first week and work within the study's existing UQ ethics approval. All coding is done on secure lab computers; recordings may not be copied or viewed off campus.
Contact	Yes, students may contact the supervisor before applying. Direct enquiries to: Professor Eric Vanman, School of Psychology [email]