

PhD Opportunity

A mixed-methods exploration of the relationship between public stigmatisation of Tourette's and teachers' perspectives of Tourette's

Supervisory Team

Director of Studies: Professor Alison Kington

Supervisor: Dr Dan Whittaker

Research Group: [Social Psychology of Education](#)

The PhD Opportunity

Tourette's Syndrome is a neuropsychiatric disorder involving involuntary multiple motor or phonic tics (Cavanna *et al*, 2009). It is often associated with swearing, but this facet – known as coprolalia – is estimated to be present in only 10% of Tourettic people (Tourette's Action, 2025).

Tourette's is highly stigmatised: from award-winning jokes ridiculing Tourette's (Malli and Forrester-Jones, 2025), to vacant and baroque stares from the public (Malli and Forrester-Jones, 2025), to being a parliamentary insult by British Prime Minister, David Cameron ("like having someone with Tourette's sitting opposite you") (Press Association, 2012). Tourette's is often the butt of jokes and rarely seen as more than just swearing. This project's supervisor, Dr Dan Whittaker, has personal experience of this stigma as a Tourettic researcher (Jones and Phoenix-Kane, 2025) and its impact on a personal level.

However, while the above indicates a steady stream of Tourette's stigma in the media, positive representations of Tourette's in public discourse – and more worryingly – in official policy and clinical guidelines are much rarer. This 'structural stigmatisation' – sadly evident in education – (Malli and Martindale, 2025) is an area that warrants greater attention in research.

This project would seek to address this issue. It is anticipated that the study may include a desk-based examination of secondary data sources, such as media reports, grey literature (including blog posts and white papers), and social media content to explore the public discourses of Tourette's. This may be combined with primary data gathered from teachers and trainee teachers using a range of qualitative methods.

This study will not only contribute to our understanding of the relationship between Tourette's discourses in public discourse and how such structural stigmatisation is represented in teachers' and trainee teachers' views but will also lead to the identification of implications and recommendations for policy and practice.

References

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- Malli, M.A., Martindale, J.M. (2025) 'Structural Stigma and Tourette Syndrome'. In: Bennett, G., Goodall, E. (eds) *The Palgrave Encyclopedia of Disability*. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham.
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- Tourette's Action (2025) *Tourette Syndrome and Social Taboos – Living with Coprophenomena*. Available at: https://www.tourettes-action.org.uk/storage/downloads/1752072581_Factsheet---Coprophenomena--v1.pdf (accessed 12 October 2025).

Application Process:

To begin the application process please go to

<https://www.worc.ac.uk/research/research-degrees/applying-for-a-phd/>.

The Interview:

All successful applicants will be offered an interview with the proposed Supervisory Team. You will be contacted by a member of the Doctoral School Team to find a suitable date. Interviews can be conducted in person or over Microsoft Teams.

Funding your PhD:

For information about Doctoral Loans please visit: <https://www.worc.ac.uk/study/fees-and-finance/doctoral-loans.aspx>

During your PhD you can access the Research Conference Support Scheme to support the costs of presenting your research at an external conference.

Research at the University of Worcester

Research is central to the University's mission to make a difference in everything that we do. We are committed to delivering excellent research which extends the boundaries of human knowledge but which also improves people's lives by enabling better health outcomes, improving food security, developing environmentally sustainable solutions for crop production and socially sustainable solutions to our ageing population, enhancing public knowledge and understanding of the past and present.

The University hence focuses its research around five high-level challenges facing society, locally, nationally and globally:

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The success of our research is reflected in our continuous improvement in external research assessment processes. In the most recent Research Excellence Framework, REF 2021, the University saw a near 50% increase in the scale of its research and 12% increase in quality, building on its performance in REF 2014 when it was the UK's most improved university in terms of Research Power, a combination of scale and quality.

Research Degrees at Worcester

Our research students are central to our overall mission for research. They are working at the cutting edge of their disciplines and driving forward the quality of our research whilst enriching our research culture. We are looking to increase our research student numbers as a strategic imperative.

Our commitment to our students is reflected in the results of the Postgraduate Research Experience Survey 2025 in which we ranked 3rd for overall research student satisfaction nationally. Key to our success in this area is the Doctoral School, a focal point for all our research students.

It provides:

- day-to-day support for our students, both administrative and practical, through our dedicated team.
- a Research Student Study Space with both PCs and laptop docking station.
- a comprehensive Researcher Development Programme for students and their supervisors.
- a programme of student-led conferences and seminars.

Research Group

The **Social Psychology of Education Research Group** draws on social psychology, as well as work in sociology and education, in order to better understand how people behave and interact. As a field of study, this provides a framework by which we can explore how teachers, practitioners and students identify and inter-relate within educational contexts. In turn, our research, which is cross-disciplinary in its theoretical and methodological approaches, presents crucial insights into the dynamics within schools and classrooms, and how these aspects of classroom life impact on the effectiveness and retention of practitioners, and the quality of children's school experiences. The Social Psychology of Education Research Group was formed to share research and good practice amongst a wide range of academics, and we have partners in a number of professional fields and third sector organisations as well as in local government.

Widening Participation:

As part of its mission statement the University is committed to widening participation for its higher degrees. Although most candidates will have an undergraduate and/or a Masters degree, the University is happy to accept applications from candidates with relevant professional qualifications and work-related experience.

For further information or an informal discussion on this project, please contact Dr Dan Whittaker: d.whittaker@worc.ac.uk

