

PhD Opportunity

Pro-Environmental Behaviour and Life History Theory.

Supervisory team

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Research Group: [Interpersonal Relationships and Wellbeing Research Group](#)

The PhD Opportunity

In order to tackle the impacts of climate change, it is important that all individuals behave and act in pro-environmental and sustainable ways in all aspects of their lives. However, it is clear that this is not what often do, so it is vital that psychological research plays a role in understanding why this is and also most importantly how to change it to encourage individuals to fully engage in environmental concerns.

One such approach is to understand how an individual's early life can affect their attitudes, beliefs and decision-making in later life. According to Life History Theory (LHT), an adverse and unpredictable early environment can act as a 'weather forecast' for their future, leading to cognitive and emotional adaptations that allow them to thrive in such environments (Frankenhuis & de Weerth, 2013; Frankenhuis & Nettle, 2020). For example, individuals will be more likely to take risks if they believe that their future is uncertain or harsh, as it will be adaptive to put more effort in to short-term, immediate outcomes than longer-term ones (Ellis et al., 2017). This is because there is no guarantee for these individuals that the latter will happen.

This future discounting (i.e. discount the future and concentrate on current goals) is a key aspect of LHT, and has clear links to pro-environmental attitudes and behaviours. By their nature, all sustainable and pro-environmental behaviours are future-oriented, and as such require individuals to have concerns and/or investment in the future in

order to behave in the correct way (i.e. incur the costs associated with living in environmentally-friendly ways). The problem therefore is how can we encourage individuals to engage in behaviours that will be valuable for the future, if they are adapted to prioritise the present?

The aim of this PhD is therefore to explore how LHT can influence individuals' pro-environmental attitudes, and in turn how this can influence their pro-environmental behaviours. Furthermore the studentship will explore how manipulation of the presentation of pro-environmental concerns to individuals for whom prioritising the future is maladaptive can positively influence their behaviour, for example by concentrating on personal future priorities, (Palomo-Vélez et al., 2020). Ultimately, the studentship will look to draw on these preliminary findings to develop interventions that can successfully promote pro-environmental and sustainable behaviours among relevant communities in global real-world settings.

References

Ellis, B. J., Bianchi, J., Griskevicius, V., & Frankenhuis, W. E. (2017). Beyond Risk and Protective Factors: An Adaptation-Based Approach to Resilience. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 12, 561–587.

Frankenhuis, W. E., & de Weerth, C. (2013). Does Early-Life Exposure to Stress Shape or Impair Cognition? *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 22, 407–412.

Frankenhuis, W. E., & Nettle, D. (2020). Current debates in human life history research. *Evolution and Human Behavior*, 41, 469–473.

Palomo-Vélez, G., Buczny, J., & Vugt, M. (2020). Encouraging Pro-Environmental Behaviors Through Children-Based Appeals: A Kin Selection Perspective. *Sustainability*, 12, 748.

Application Process

To begin the application process please go to <https://www.worcester.ac.uk/courses/psychology-mphilphd> and click on 'How to Apply' in the top menu. This PhD could be carried out on a part time or full time basis so please select the relevant application link. On the application form, please make it clear that you are applying for one of our advertised projects so we can direct it straight to the relevant people.

The Interview

All successful applicants will be offered an interview with the proposed Supervisory Team. You will be contacted by a member of the Research 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 Student Support Scheme to support dissemination costs associated with your research, up to £500 a year.

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:

- [Human Health and Wellbeing](#)
- [Sustainable Futures](#)
- [Digital Innovation](#)
- [Culture, Identity and Social Exclusion](#)
- [Professional Education](#)

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 2023 in which we ranked 3rd for overall research student satisfaction nationally. Key to our success in this area is the Research 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

Interpersonal Relationships & Wellbeing Research Group

The Interpersonal Relationships and Wellbeing Research Group draws together internationally renowned academics from across Psychology, Business and Criminology, with partners in Industry, third sector organisations and local government. Research activity is organised around four themes: Wellbeing for Life; Customer Interactions; People and Work; and Trauma and Violence Prevention.

We study interpersonal relationships, wellbeing and their inter-connectivity from an inter-disciplinary perspective, to generate applied, solution-focussed research. Our research explores how individual, social and environmental factors influence relationships and wellbeing within different contexts, such as in workplaces, schools and online spaces. We are interested in understanding how interpersonal relationships contribute to mental health (construed as both trauma/mental ill-health, and as wellbeing) and how they shape individual and team behaviour in consumer and organizational settings. In doing so, we explore both the 'dark' and 'light' side of relationships and human behaviour more broadly.

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, contact Dr Daniel Farrelly (Director of Studies) via email at d.farrelly@worc.ac.uk