

PhD Studentship

Exploring borderline personality disorder diagnosis in bipolar disorder in the UK

Closing date: Monday 5th June 2017 (9am)

Interview date: Wednesday 28th or Thursday 29th June 2017

Supervisory team

Director of Studies:

[Professor Lisa Jones](#), Professor of Psychological Medicine, lead for [Mood Disorders Research Group](#), Institute of Health & Society, University of Worcester

Supervisors:

[Professor Eleanor Bradley](#), Professor of Health Psychology, Institute of Health & Society, University of Worcester

[Dr Katherine Gordon-Smith](#), Senior Research Fellow in Psychological Medicine, [Mood Disorders Research Group](#), Institute of Health & Society, University of Worcester

The Project

Applications are invited for a fully-funded full-time PhD studentship exploring the diagnosis of borderline personality disorder in individuals who have bipolar disorder in the UK.

Context

Bipolar disorder and borderline personality disorder share some similarities in their symptoms and signs. Despite these similarities the two disorders have very different aetiologies and prognoses (Paris & Black 2015). However, the two disorders are commonly diagnosed comorbidly. Estimates of the degree of comorbidity vary from as low as 4% (George et al. 2003) to as high as 50% (Wilson et al. 2007) but sample sizes are often very small. This high level of comorbidity could in fact reflect diagnostic uncertainty. There is currently no biomarker for either disorder, thus diagnosis relies on clinical assessment of signs and symptoms and interpretation of these against diagnostic criteria. Misdiagnosis can lead to inappropriate treatment, incorrect prognosis and may have important effects on the patient's self-identity, self-worth, illness behaviours and interpersonal interactions. However, there is a paucity of research in this area, particularly in the UK. Much of the previous research has been in North America, where there are cultural differences in psychiatric diagnostic practices compared to the UK (Fornaro et al. 2016), and has relied on small samples or systematic reviews of a number of heterogeneous small studies. There is a lack of in-depth qualitative research exploring the patient perspective, and that of healthcare professionals.

This studentship addresses an important clinical issue that has previously received little research attention. The findings of this research have the potential to influence diagnostic practice within this complex area of psychiatry.

Aims and Objectives

The student will finalise specific aims and objectives based on a thorough review of existing literature. They will have access to a large research sample of individuals with well-characterised bipolar disorder. Within the sample they will have the opportunity to explore, for example:

- frequency of clinical diagnosis *changing* between bipolar disorder and borderline personality disorder.
- frequency of *comorbid* clinical diagnoses of bipolar disorder and borderline personality disorder (i.e., receiving both diagnoses concurrently).
- frequency and severity of borderline personality traits measured dimensionally (as opposed to categorical diagnosis of borderline personality disorder).
- clinical and demographic features associated with having a changed/comorbid clinical diagnosis of bipolar disorder and borderline personality disorder.
- relationship between having a changed/comorbid clinical diagnosis of bipolar disorder and borderline personality disorder and other trait measures (for example, measures of affective instability, affective temperament, impulsive personality).
- experience of individuals with a changed/comorbid clinical diagnosis bipolar disorder and borderline personality (for example, their understanding of each diagnosis, how each diagnosis impacts on clinical care, interactions with healthcare professionals, relationships with friends and family, self-identity and self-esteem, health/illness behaviours, employment, insurances).
- diagnostic experiences of healthcare professionals, their attitudes towards the complexities and controversies of diagnosing borderline personality disorder or bipolar disorder, and how they believe each diagnosis impacts their interactions and treatment of the patient.

Indicative methodology

It is envisaged that the project will employ mixed quantitative and qualitative methods.

Quantitative methods

The student will work within the Bipolar Disorder Research Network (BDRN, www.bdrn.org) and become a full member of this vibrant multi-disciplinary research group. BDRN has recruited in excess of 6000 individuals with bipolar disorder throughout the UK. Data have been collected on borderline personality disorder (whether a clinical diagnosis has ever been received and whether the primary clinical diagnosis has ever changed between bipolar disorder and borderline personality disorder), and borderline personality traits using a standardised questionnaire measure. The student will be able to work with this large dataset to conduct statistical analyses to address specific research questions around the frequency of clinical diagnosis changes and borderline traits, and relationships between these and the rich clinical, psychological and social research data also available.

Qualitative methods

The student will design, conduct and analyse qualitative one-to-one semi-structured research interviews with BDRN participants who have received a clinical diagnosis of both borderline personality disorder and bipolar disorder to explore their perceptions and experiences of the impacts of each diagnosis as outlined above. The student may also conduct qualitative interviews with healthcare staff depending on the final aims/objectives of the project.

References

- Fornaro, M. et al., 2016. The prevalence and predictors of bipolar and borderline personality disorders comorbidity: Systematic review and meta-analysis. *Journal of affective disorders*, 195, pp.105–118.
- George, E.L. et al., 2003. The comorbidity of bipolar disorder and axis II personality disorders: prevalence and clinical correlates. *Bipolar disorders*, 5(2), pp.115–22.
- Paris, J. & Black, D.W., 2015. Borderline personality disorder and bipolar disorder: what is the difference and why does it matter? *The Journal of nervous and mental disease*, 203(1), pp.3–7.
- Wilson, S.T. et al., 2007. Comparing impulsiveness, hostility, and depression in borderline personality disorder and bipolar II disorder. *The Journal of clinical psychiatry*, 68(10), pp.1533–9.

The University of Worcester

Research at the University of Worcester has grown significantly over the last 10 years. This growth is most clearly shown in the outcomes of the Research Excellence Framework (REF 2014). Worcester was the most improved University in the UK based on Research Fortnight's "Research Power" measure, reflecting a more than four-fold increase in the number of staff submitted compared to RAE 2008 and a commensurate increase in the quality of the research. As a consequence of its REF 2014 submission, Worcester's QR income for 2015-16 is up by 341% from 2014-15.

The University is committed to further developing its research profile in the coming period, through a strategic approach to its support for and investment in research. As part of this investment it is funding a number of full-time PhD studentships in its areas of particular research strength.

Institute of Health & Society

The [Institute of Health & Society](#) brings together academics and researchers from across a wide range of disciplines but with a shared focus of enhancing the health and well-being of society through its education and research. Its transformational research seeks to address some of the major issues within health professions, local services, community and beyond. By pulling together academics working across disciplines to tackle important, social, scientific and environmental challenges, this research is having an impact on people's lives and helping to expand the institute's base of world-leading research.

Areas of particular research strength are: Mental Health, Dementia Studies, Domestic Violence and Abuse and Palliative Care. The Mood Disorders Research Group is a core component of the University's mental health research.

Research School

The Research School is 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

Details of the studentship

During the period of your studentship you will receive the following:

- a tax free bursary of £13,863 for a period of 3 years
- a fee-waiver for 4 years at the UK/EU fee rate
- a laptop
- use of the Research Student Study Space in Research School
- access to the Research Student Support Scheme to cover costs and expenses related to your research

You will be expected to play an active role in the life of both the Research School and of the Institute of Health & Society. You will be given opportunities to gain experience in learning and teaching within the Institute under the guidance of your Director of Studies.

Qualifications needed

Essential:

Applicants should have and be able to evidence:

- A First or Upper Second (2.1) Honours Degree, or expect to receive one by October 2017;
- A sound understanding of, and interest in severe mental illness;
- Experience of relevant research methods and skills;
- Ability to contribute to research study design;
- Means of travelling independently to conduct research interviews with research participants in their own homes. Research participants live throughout the UK;
- Computer literacy;
- Ability to organise and meet deadlines;
- Good interpersonal skills;
- Ability to work independently and contribute to a team;
- Commitment and an enthusiastic approach to completing a higher research degree.

Desirable:

- Education to Masters Degree level in a relevant area.

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

The Interview

The interview will provisionally be held on 28th or 29th June 2017. All successful applicants will be interviewed. You will be asked to make a short presentation on a topic related to the study. You will also be asked to provide an example of your written work (e.g. a dissertation) ahead of the interview.

For further information or an informal discussion on this project, please contact Professor Lisa Jones (Director of Studies) via email at lisa.jones@worc.ac.uk

Application forms are available at:

<http://www.worcester.ac.uk/researchstudentships>

Completed application forms should be sent by email to: research@worc.ac.uk or sent via post to: Research School, Jenny Lind Building, Henwick Grove, St Johns, Worcester, WR2 6AJ