

PhD opportunity: Examining school-based body image interventions in Africa and/or Latin America

Number of awards: 2

Closing date: 20th October 2025

Start dates: January, April or October 2026

About the project

Two PhD studentships are available as part of the project 'BIRES: Building body image resilience in populations undergoing rapid economic development'. This research is a collaborative project working with academics in multiple countries, to expand our understanding of whether and how media literacy and positive body image activities can increase resilience to appearance pressures in adolescents. Low-income communities around the globe are experiencing rapid and accelerating increases in access to visual media via the internet and satellite television alongside substantial changes in diet, which put them at ever increasing risk of eating disorders and related pathologies. Most body image intervention research focuses on high-income, Western populations. There is no systematic evidence base demonstrating the best means of preventing unrealistic appearance ideals becoming entrenched in global youth. BIRES seeks to establish a theoretical framework for body image education in low- and middle-income countries, through the delivery and evaluation of a culturally-tailored intervention in multiple populations undergoing rapid economic and social change. Controlled cross-cultural studies will be informed by locally-led participatory research.

Two large scale trials are underway/in preparation in Colombia and Nicaragua. The current PhD projects will partner with researchers in other countries including Mexico and/or Zimbabwe, to run targeted research studies which expand upon the large trials in new cultural contexts (2 countries per student). One PhD project will focus on Latin America, including Mexico where project partner Dr Olga Grijalva are already piloting the intervention in Oaxaca. The other PhD project will focus on Africa, including Zimbabwe where we have previously collected pilot data with collaborator Dr McDonald Matika. Although potential second countries in each continent have already been identified, the PhD students may contribute to the choice of the second country, for instance via their own personal, research or family background.

The role

The students will run pilot questionnaires and run initial interviews with young adult participants and/or their parents in each country, deliver the school-based body image programme (including cultural adaptation where necessary), and conduct quantitative and qualitative assessment of the acceptability, feasibility and efficacy of the programme in the target communities. The research will involve extensive fieldwork in two countries per student with potential field visits to other countries within the broader project. The PhD student will use both quantitative and qualitative analysis techniques across the project, and will gain skills in community engagement, co-production of research, and scientific writing.

The research will be supported by supervisors Prof Lynda Boothroyd (the project leader), Dr Elizabeth Evans (an expert in intervention assessment) and Dr Fabienne Andres (postdoctoral researcher on the project). The student will attend regular lab meetings with fellow students from within the project and other body image related projects, and benefit from membership of the Developmental Science Research Group within the Department of Psychology.

More information about the project and Prof Boothroyd's team: <https://lgboothroyd.webspace.durham.ac.uk/>

Candidate characteristics

Essential characteristics:

1. A strong academic performance in an undergraduate degree (a 2.1 classification for UK degrees, or equivalent for international degrees) or Masters qualification in Psychology, Anthropology, Education, or closely related fields
2. Experience conducting research, e.g., research thesis/dissertation
3. Excellent English written and verbal communication

4. Demonstrable leadership and teamwork abilities
5. Statistical experience (as acquired through class or a research project)
6. [For Latin America project only] Spoken and written Spanish (CEFR B2 level or above)

Desirable characteristics:

7. Existing insight into communities in one or more African or Latin American country
8. Having contributed (as a co-author or lead author) to scientific publication(s)
9. Experience conducting fieldwork (e.g., through a field school; as a research assistant) or extended work/study/travel in a different cultural context
10. Experience and understanding of qualitative data analysis
11. Experience conducting statistical analyses in R

Funding Notes

Each PhD studentship is for 3 years. The funding covers a tax-free stipend at the UKRI rate (£20,780 for 25/26) and the full tuition fees, as well as fieldwork costs.

How to apply

If you are interested in applying, you should submit an application through the university's applications portal (<https://www.durham.ac.uk/study/postgraduate/research-degrees/how-to-apply/>), including:

- Your academic CV;
- Degree certificates and transcripts;
- Two Reference Forms completed by your referees Reference Form (Postgraduate Research)
- Personal statement detailing your reasons for applying for the project, and how you meet the candidate characteristics;
- A research proposal (max 1500 words) outlining: a proposed country in Africa or Latin America for trialling the intervention (including how the context of that country is relevant to the project), 1-3 research questions you would test in that country, and how you would test them.
- A writing sample (e.g., essay, dissertation/thesis, publication);
- If a non-native English speaker, evidence of English language ability with an IELTS score of 7 with no element below 6.5, or a recent (within 2 years) qualification taught in English;

Please also email pgrinfo.psy@durham.ac.uk (Departmental PhD administrator) and gemma.cornetti@durham.ac.uk (Personal assistant to Professor Boothroyd) to inform them you wish to be considered for the Boothroyd/BIRES studentship so your application can be appropriately directed.

Relevant reading

Thornborrow, T., Boothroyd, L. G., & Tovee, M. J. (2025). ["Thank God we are like this here": A qualitative investigation of televisual media influence on women's body image in an ethnically diverse rural Nicaraguan population](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bodyim.2024.101817). *Body Image*, 52, Article 101817. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bodyim.2024.101817>

Andres, F. E., et al. (2024). [Relationships between media influence, body image and sociocultural appearance ideals in Latin America: A systematic literature review](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bodyim.2024.101774). *Body Image*, 51, Article 101774. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bodyim.2024.101774>

Lewis-Smith, H., Garbett, K. M., Chaudhry, A., Dhillon, M., Shroff, H., White, P., & Diedrichs, P. C. (2023). Evaluating a body image school-based intervention in India: A randomized controlled trial. *Body Image*, 44, 148-156. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1740144522002091>